SIKHISM AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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by

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FOREWORD

The latter half of the twentieth century has seen our wide big world being transformed into a global village and the entire humankind into a global community. Now people belonging to different religions and cultures in a way live as next door neighbours. These different faith-communities are so placed as to live together and interact with one another on daily basis. They can neither afford to live in isolation of nor clash with one another. This coupled with the phenomenon of religious resurgence which this period has witnessed has resulted in a good amount of literature being published on the subject of religion.

The easy availability of literature on all religions has resulted in better understanding of religions - our own and others. The earlier belief in the myth of uniqueness of one's own faith is now gradually giving way to the belief that Truth is many-sided. Multiple religions break down the clear effulgence of Light into a multi-coloured spectrum of human religious expressions. The Absolute is infinite and inexpressible, but we can study how different people in different languages and cultures experienced God and how their scriptures have interpreted that experience. Men, women and children of other faiths are genuine persons, with genuine faiths, those who see the universe but see it in different ways.

Since this attitude has been a pre-requisite for making inter-community relations peaceful and harmonious, many books have come out from the perspective of different religions, including Christianity, Islam and Buddhism which happen to be missionary faiths. However, there were only some stray articles and no such full-length study was attempted from the Sikh perspective. Soon after I took over as Vice-Chancellor, I asked Professor Dharam Singh,

who had retired a little earlier and who had been working on the subject for the past few years, to take up the project. I an happy that he was able to complete the work within the one-year post-retirement assignment given to him.

Apart from defining religious pluralism and analyzing inter-faith relations in the Indian context, the book endeavours to study the Sikh scripture and tradition to articulate the Sikh attitude toward other faiths and faith-communities. It tries to highlight the Sikh view that God's 'voice speaks in many languages, communicating itself in a diversity of intuitions. The word of God never comes to an end. No word is God's last word'. The Sikh acceptance of the entire humankind as one brotherhood, all religions as genuine paths and different communities as genuine people is also emphasized.

The book, I hope, I will be a welcome addition to the literature on religious pluralism and might be helpful in building harmonious and peaceful inter-community relations.

Punjabi University
Patiala

Dr. Jaspal Singh
Vice-Chancellor

CONTENTS

	Foreword	(v-vi)
	Introduction	1-8
I.	Religious Pluralism : Concept And Meaning	9-44
II.	Interfaith Encounter : Indian Context	45-80
III.	Pluralism : A Canonical Perspective	81-116
IV.	Pluralism and Sikh Tradition	117-145
	Conclusion	146-153
	Bibliography	154-158

INTRODUCTION

History of religion has been as old as that of humankind. Similarly, each religion was born into a religiously plural world and developed throughout its history in that context. However, religious beliefs and practices of people living in different regions and eras have generally differed from those of one another. In ancient times, these differences did not widely affect human social relations because people then lived isolated in their respective religious and cultural groups. Lack of efficient means of communication and transportation kept them blissfully ignorant of what kind of cultures or religions existed or happened outside of their limited geographical universe. But the advancement especially in the fields of information technology and transportation has now made different faith-communities have closer interaction among themselves. Unlike in ancient times, they cannot remain oblivious of the fact of religious plurality and its theological and social implications.

Religious plurality is also not peculiar or special to any particular country of the world. There is hardly a country today where the entire population has the same religious beliefs and practices. Even within the same faith-community, there are different beliefs and practices, thus further dividing the community into groups and sub-groups. Modern-day world has become a global village and the entire humankind a global community. No part of the world is now closed within itself, and no faith or faith-community can afford to live in isolation of the other. No religion can claim to be the sole valid way of worship and no religion can claim to be the norm for other religions. People from different religions and cultures are so placed as to live together and interact

with one another on daily basis. These people belonging to different faith-communities must learn to live and meet together to work unitedly to solve the problems facing them: they can no more afford to clash, rather they must collaborate and cooperate. We must realize that "the religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism.... This is true for all of us."

In such a scenario, it becomes relevant to analyze the role of religion in understanding and determining inter-community relations so as to bring about lasting peace and harmony in human social relations. Globalization has put an end to the era when the complex of religious and cultural superiority validated and encouraged a particular religious and racial group for the political and economic exploitation of the so-called savage and pagan people. This complex was supported and sanctified in the Indian sub-continent by the Muslim invaders/conquerors/rulers as well as by the colonial powers of the Christian West. Almost the same kind of attitude was (and is still being) faced by the Indians/Asians as they migrated to the predominantly Christian West. Colonialism has since been replaced by democratic republicanism in most of the countries. Situation is changing in a significant way in the West also. It is not now "morally possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: "We are saved and you are dammed"; or, "We believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong".

Many theologians and academics have for the past few decades been working in the field of interfaith relations. The initiative in this direction was taken by some Christian theologians. Among them Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, Alan Race and Paul Knitter have been the pioneers. They have tried to analyze different attitudes of one religion toward others, and endeavoured to arrive at a consensual definition of pluralism. Though no

universally accepted prescriptive definition of religious pluralism has yet been arrived at, but theologians, who met at a pluralist conclave organized by John Hick in September 2003 at Birmingham University, agreed on certain key principles of pluralism. These principles were then published in the seminar proceedings, *Myth of Religious Plurality*, published by Orbis Books. However, these Christian scholars have in their books primarily discussed the Christian attitude toward other religions of the world. There have also been available certain full-length studies made from the Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu perspective.

No doubt, Sikhism tends to be pluralist in its doctrinal conception but, unfortunately, no systematic study has so far been made on this subject from the Sikh perspective. There have been some stray articles by some scholars working in the field of Sikh studies. Apart form Gurnam Singh Sanghera's pionering work, *Interfaith Relations: A Sikh Perspective* (2008), Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia, Dr N. Muthu Mohan, and Dr Shashi Bala have also contributed a few articles in some collections. Sikhism has recently also found a place among other religions at national/international seminars dealing with the theme of multifaith exploration. However, a systematic, full-length study needed to be attempted which should look at the religious diversity of India, articulate the Sikh attitude toward other religions based on its scripture and tradition and highlight the role it can play to turn this diversity into an asset for the nation.

I became interested in the field of interfaith/pluralist studies when Dr Macus Braybrooke, a well known name in the field of interfaith studies, visited the University on our invitation to present the keynote address at a seminar organized by the Department of Encyclopaedia of Sikhism in March 2000. The presentation he made on "Religion and Conflict" with special reference to Sikhism was later included in the seminar proceedings published by the University under the title *Perspectives on Sikhism*. Dr Braybrooke's

visit proved more fruitful for us when, impressed by the content and organization of the seminar, he as President of the World Congress of Faiths, Oxford, suggested collaboration with the Punjabi University to organize in 2002 an international interfaith seminar on 'The Contribution of Interfaith Work towards Social Harmony and World Peace'. He also invited me to participate in the World Congress of Faiths' conference being held at the University of Leicester in September 2001 so as to have a feel of the trends in the interfaith studies.

Soon thereafter I had the opportunity to serve as interfaith visiting scholar at the United College of the Ascension, Birmingham, UK, for the spring term of 2002. This was a very welcome opportunity for me to have a dialogue with scholars working in the field of pluralism/interfaith studies and also make use of the local libraries to browse through books which otherwise are not easily available in India. It was during my stay there that the idea of doing a book on religious pluralism from the Sikh perspective came to my mind. Various other things kept me occupied and I could not find time to take it up until after my retirement from the University when I was asked by the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Jaspal Singh, to do a project on Sikh response to certain concerns of modern-day life, including interfaith relations, environment, bioethics, etc.

I agreed to first take up work on Sikhism and Pluralism, and started working on the subject from July 2008. It took me a few months' concentrated study to put the ideas in shape. I was able to begin the work of writing by the end of year. While working on the script, I still needed some documentary evidences to fill in the gaps. An invitation in April 2009 from Nottingham (England) came in handy and I was able to make use of this opportunity to procure certain more books and get a few others photo-copied. The Principal and staff of the Queen's College at Birmingham were especially kind to me to let me have free access to their

library for a few days and let me have portions of certain books photo-copied. This enabled me to give my typescript a final touch.

As it is, the work comprises four major chapters. Chapter I is theoretical in nature and deals with the concept of religious pluralism. I have tried herein to discuss the modern-day social existential situation and the need for amiable interfaith relations and have followed it up with a discussion on different attitudes of varied religions and religious communities toward others. I have broadly agreed with Alan Race's division of these attitudes into exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism because this division has been widely accepted by most of the theologians with minor variations of stress. Among the other supporters of this categorization are Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, Paul Knitter, *et al.* whereas Hans Kung, Karl Rahner, Raimundo Panikkar, et al. have small differences. Broadly speaking, exclusivism is an attitude born of the myth of uniqueness and superiority of one's faith. Such an attitude claims monopoly over truth for its faith and acknowledges other religions as inauthentic and other faith-communities as pagan. Thus, salvation lies only in his faith whereas followers of other faiths stand damned. There can be no place for dialogue with the faith-community holding on to such an attitude of superiority.

Inclusivism is an attitude which gives some space to other faiths but sticks to the idea that ultimate salvation lies only in his faith. Protagonists of this attitude agree to have a dialogue with other faiths and faith-communities but the outcome of the dialogue is pre-determined in their favour. This is a step toward pluralism, but in itself it remains close to exclusivism. Pluralism is the attitude which happens to be the need of the day. It accepts and appreciates plurality of religions in our social existential life. It holds that God's voice speaks in many languages, communicating itself in a diversity of intuitions. The word of God never comes to an end. No word is God's last word. "It is not necessary for the entire

flock to graze on one pasture or to enter and leave the master's house through just one door. It would be neither in accord with the shepherd's wishes nor conducive to the growth of his flocks." This is pluralistic attitude, and we feel that this kind of attitude can make different faith-communities live in peace and harmony with one another.

Chapter II deals with the Indian encounter with religious plurality. Apart from the *sramanic* faiths of Jainism and Buddhism, there are two more religions-Hinduism and Sikhism - of Indian origin. Two of the Semitic religions, Islam and Christianity, now have their followers in significant numbers in India. Both of them came to India first as traders and gradually settled down as conquerors and rulers of the country. We have discussed in this chapter the history of relationships among religions of Indian origin and between Indian religions on the one hand and Semitic religions on the other. The former are product of the same culture yet they differ from one another on several points in their articulation of metaphysics and social philosophy. This difference comes out clear in the Hindu-Buddhist clash in earlier times. The Semitic religions originated in entirely alien cultures and they strongly believed in the myth of their uniqueness and superiority vis-à-vis Indian religions. Thus, their relationship with the latter was never smooth and harmonious.

Among religions of Indian origin, Hinduism and the *sramanic* religions agree with one another in regard to the *karma* (the mental trace or seed left behind by each thought or action that predisposes one to a similar thought or action in the future; volition, action), *samsara* (the world of phenomena, which is incessantly in motion or flux and of which rebirth is an aspect) and *jiva* (the empirical self, the individual soul) being *anadi* (beginningless) and that by following a particular spiritual path (*marga*) release could be realized. However, each of them posed a different understanding of the divine or absolute to be experienced at the end of the spiritual

path. The Brahmanical tradition conceived reality as "pure being" or a pure unchanging substance, a concept found expressed in the *atma* doctrine of the Upanisads. Buddhism takes an entirely opposite view in regard to its perception of reality, and we find that Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions to a large extent shaped each other through mutual opposition and debate. On the other hand, the Jaina view "may be said to constitute the third stream of Indian philosophy – laying mid-way between the two extremes. As for the Semitic religions of Christianity and Islam, both of them believed in the myth of their uniqueness and superiority. They also tried to justify expansionism, thereby seeking patronage of the ruling class. Thus, their relationship with religions of Indian origin, especially Sikhism was not smooth and cordial.

Chapter III is an attempt at making a pluralistic reading of the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. As we have discussed in the first chapter, pluralism implies an attitude of acceptance and appreciation toward other religions and faith-communities. All religions are not the same, rather they are different historical manifestations of the Real One. However, they all can be equal participants in the eco-human welfare. This is possible only if we accept the other with his otherness. The Guru Granth Sahib is a beautiful example of acceptance, critical acceptance of plurality of religions. It acknowledges different religions as different paths leading to the ultimate objective. The very format of the scripture emphasizes the Sikh view that revelation is not religion-specific, region-specific, caste-specific or person-specific. That is why the scripture enjoins upon a Muslim to be a true Muslim and a Hindu to be a true Hindu. It makes an unequivocal statement saying that neither the Vedas (the scriptures of the East) nor the Qateb (scriptures of the Semitic religions) are false, rather false are those who do not reflect on them. One is advised to first listen to the other and then put forth one's own point of view because that is the only way to reach the truth. Dialogue is recommended, and polemic is strongly condemned. The "Sidha Gosti", a longer

composition by Guru Nanak included in the Guru Granth Sahib, is a beautiful example of interfaith dialogue, a dialogue on the Sikh way of life vis-à-vis the yogic way of life.

No philosophy or ideology however noble and perfect is of any use unless it is put into practice. Sikhism has well been called a way of life because the Sikh Gurus first articulated a distinct metaphysical doctrine and then made it the vis-a-tergo of their social philosophy. Chapter IV is an attempt at highlight how the pluralistic trends seen in the Sikh scriptural hymns find their expression in the practical Sikh way of life. We have tried to study various instances from the lives of the Gurus and from the history of the Sikh people in support of the Sikh stand for tolerance and acceptance of other faiths.

The results of the project should be of immense social significance and use. Religious plurality is a fact of today's existential reality, but the need of the hour is a religiously plural social order minus all those evils that we suffer from today, such as mutual distrust and disharmony, dominance and exploitation, mutual jealously and hatred. Violence and hatred within the mind as well as outside in the society must be replaced with lasting peace, and this is possible only if each religion develops an attitude of acceptance and appreciation towards other faiths and if each faith-community becomes an equal participant in all social interactions. The present book is a humble endeavour in this direction, and hope it will be of some benefit to the researchers and students working in the field.

Punjabi University,
Patiala
30 May 2009

DHARAM SINGH

Chapter I

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM : CONCEPT AND MEANING

I

The immediate and ultimate objective of human life is to achieve happiness. The history of human race is a long saga of human desire and endeavour to realize this objective. Most of the time man continues under the erroneous impression that physical comforts and joys are the real happiness, and he gives away his life to the acquisition of these comforts. The recent revolutionary scientific and technological advancement has enabled man to achieve many material comforts which he had not even dreamt of only a few decades back. In spite of all these comforts and facilities achieved after so much of competitive struggle and strife, the ultimate objective of happiness still eludes man. Consequently, man suffers for not being at peace either with himself or with fellow human beings.

There have been several factors responsible for the absence of peace and happiness in human mind as well as in human social relations-economic, political, social and religious. Since the main thrust of this study is limited to the role of religion, especially Sikh religion in bringing about harmony and peace in human social relations, we shall discuss in the following pages the religious factor only. History stands testimony that men in power always tend to use religion for selfish ends. They try to create mutual mistrust and hatred among different faith-communities so as to perpetuate their power, and do not feel shy of using religion for this purpose. In the process, the basic human rights are violated and fundamental freedom is denied to man. Thus, instead of loving

one another, people are often at war– either mentally or physically– against one another.

No doubt, the plurality of religions has ever since recorded human hitory been a fact of human social existential situation. In other words, plurality of religions is not new to the world: though it is as old as the history of man itself, yet it was not experienced with the same intensity in the past as it is being experienced today. Also, the human perception of it has changed a lot during the past few decades. In the past people belonging to different religious traditions lived secure in their own tiny and isolated camps. Lack of any efficient means of communication and transportation kept them blissfully unaware and ignorant of what existed or happened outside their own camps. A limited geographical region was their complete universe. They had little contact with people outside their little world. Thus, they ever remained oblivious of any social and theological issues arising from the coming together of people of different religious persuasions.

Obviously, things have changed rather dramatically especially during the past hundred years or so. The cultural, religious, racial, linguistic and geographical boundaries have been broken on a scale never imagined by anybody in the world and never experienced in the world in the past before that. No country or community can today claim to be the cultural or historical centre of the world. It will now be no hyperbole to call and consider the world as one global village and the world-population as one global community. No part of the world is now closed within itself. Modern man is destined to live in a world which is culturally, racially, linguistically and religiously plural. No religion can claim to be the sole valid way of worship and no religion can claim to be the norm for other religions. People from different religions and cultures are so placed as to live together and interact with one another. In today's global world, several factors have significantly eroded the self-sufficiency in religious allegiance. A Jewish

theologian has beautifully summed up the contemporary social reality of religious plurality with the help of a metaphor. He says, "It is not necessary for the entire flock to graze on one pasture nor to enter and leave the master's house through just one door. It would be neither in accord with the shepherd's wisdom not conducive to the growth of his flocks."[1]

Thus, we see that human social situation has ever been marked by religious plurality but this plurality and the consequent theological and social problems were not, for certain obvious reasons, felt with the same intensity in the past as they are being felt now. Earlier any attitude toward other faith or faith-community could pass without affecting the world at large, but now any such action is bound to have strong reactions all over the world. If a dominant faith-community in one country adopts exclusivistic and intolerant attitude towards the other minority faith-communities, this can lead to a reaction in some other countries where the latter happen to be in majority and the former in minority. In this age of globalization, no community enjoys dominant majority in each country of its residence and no action resulting from religious exclusivism and intolerance can remain either confined to a limited region or hidden from the world at large.

Thus, the paramount need of modern times is for man to have a true and proper understanding of religion. This understanding should not be limited only to one's own faith, rather one must learn to understand and appreciate the faiths of his neighbours also: one can, in fact, understand and appreciate his own religion better after he begins to understand other religions. Man must also be aware of how sometimes leaders-both ecclesiastical and political–misuse religion for their narrow political ends and cause unnecessary but long-lasting friction between different faith-communities. The point at issue becomes increasingly important today when revolutionary developments in the fields of transportation and communication have transformed this wide,

big world into a global village, and made the social life therein religiously (and also culturally, racially and linguistically) pluralistic.

As it is, in this practical situation, man cannot run away from or wish away the social reality of religious plurality and the social and theological issues arising from it. Varied religions and their followers are today placed face to face, interpenetrating and interacting with one another. These people of different faith-communities must learn to live and meet together to work united to solve the problems facing them: they can no more afford to clash, rather they must collaborate and cooperate. We must realize that "the religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism.... This is true for all of us"[2] Acceptance and tolerance of other faiths and faith-communities is necessary, but tolerance "as a form of minimal acknowledgement that plurality is a fact of existence is not enough for more complex multifaith and multicultural societies."[3] Pluralism in religious experience is required to exercise reason and freedom of conscience.

If we are destined to live in a religiously plural world and if we also wish to live a meaningful and peaceful life, we must think, and think seriously as to what sort of attitude we should adopt toward other religions and faith-communities. Different theologians and other religious leaders look at religions other than their own from different perspectives. Even political leadership of a country comes to play a crucial role when plurality becomes a newly experienced reality in their country. The rapid rise of migrants with varied cultural and religious persuasions to the predominantly Christian west has been a case in point. In fact, the shift towards endorsement of plurality has not occurred in a uniform manner throughout the world and through the ages. There have been nations which opposed or rejected it initially fearing it might threaten their fragile unity and there are others which still oppose this. They considered – and still do so - demands from

minority groups for cultural equality with majority groups a potential danger to their integrity. They preferred the assimilation of emigrants into local culture and religion but felt upset and even angry finding them unwilling to abandon their religion, language and even cuisine.

What is and ought to be the attitude of one religion and religious community toward other religions and religious communities? Obviously, all religions share common ethical ground across the traditions. They stand for equality and justice in human social affairs and love, compassion, humility and philanthropy in human personal life. However, many of us tend to restrict these values to our co-religionists only. Generally, our attitude differs between whom we call 'our own' (co-religionists) and those we consider 'others', i.e. those who profess a different faith. Certain scholars have discussed this attitude in the context of clash/conflict of civilizations also. To a large degree, the major civilizations in human history have been closely identified with the world's great religions: religion happens to be the most import of all objective elements which define civilization. However, unfortunately, people professing different faiths tend to be at war with one another even though they share ethnicity and language.[4] In this latter category, the two civilizations that today stand antagonistic to each other are Islamic and Western Christian.[5] A Sikh scholars takes a comprehensive view of this peculiar attitude and discusses it under the categories of "superpower imperium" and "majoritarian imperium."

We find the "superpower imperium" today manifested in the form of inter-civilization conflicts. The latter half of the twentieth century has seen the almost simultaneous rise of religious fundamentalism[6] and religious resurgence. Both these developments have nothing common in between them except being almost contemporaneous. However, the Western world (superpower imperium) has erred in treating religious resurgence as an umbrella

term for religious intolerance and fundamentalism and in proclaiming western-style secularism as the only answer to all religious conflicts and violence. The attitude the Western Christian world has now adopted against the Islamic fundamentalism in certain countries can lead to a clash between these two civilizations. We must realize that religious fundamentalism and intolerance, religious hatred and violence are not to be confused with religious resurgence: the cure for the former may lie in the latter. Religious mistrust and violence can ultimately be checked by a renewed appreciation of religion itself.

The "majoritarian imperium" implies the religious majority's implicit as well as explicit endeavours to have its full sway within the state. It finds its aspirations and endeavours as fully justified, unmindful of the rights and aspirations of minorities. To achieve this objective, it tries various stratagem, including the effort to assimilate the religious minorities unto itself in the name of homogenization. This is being done by pressing religion into the service of political (though the euphemism used is 'national') ends. The apprehensive minority, thus, becomes a closed society, one class within a rigid society. They apprehend absorption by the majority and make conscious attempts aimed at keeping their identity intact. This tends to change religious distinctness into the myth of religious uniqueness and exclusivism. Thus, both the communities stop themselves from participating in interfaith dialogue and cooperation and become apprehensive and distrustful of each other. This proves very harmful for the general health of society.

With a few exceptions, the whole world is now veering round to the view that both the 'superpower imperium' and the 'majoritarian imperium' are dangerous trends and deserve our condemnation. No majority community can now afford to suppress or absorb any other community since each faith-community is a minority community at most of the other places

in the world. Any unjustified oppressive action of a majority or powerful community in one country can lead to backlash in other countries where it might happen to be in pathetic minority or may not be able to exert power. Similarly, no community or civilization can claim to be superior to or norm for other religions and civilizations. Any such attempt is sure to lead to mutual mistrust and even wars between nations and civilizations. Both these attitudes have justifiably received condemnation from many quarters and will have to be rectified sooner than later.

The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of different religions. Religion bestows on us a responsibility not only to relieve suffering but to work together to transform the world: concern for the widespread suffering that grips humanity and threatens the planet must be the common cause for all religions.[7] We have to adopt an attitude which makes human social life peaceful and meaningful. Different faith-communities all over the world must accept the fact of religious plurality and use this for their well-being. Each of the religious and cultural groups, however minor, needs to be given space and opportunity "to build a foundation for their self-respect on the bedrock of their own cultural and religious traditions."[8] Each new religion is the product of divine intention and therefore has the theological right to exist. To realize this objective, we need to make a study of different attitudes toward other faith-communities and find out the most reasonable and universally acceptable attitude so that we are able to bring about peace and harmony in human social relations by removing unwanted bitterness and hatred among different faith-communities.

II

The theologians studying the role of religion in determining inter-community behaviour have variously categorized the attitudes different religions have towards other faiths and faith-communities. The most common and more widely accepted has been the

classification made by Alan Race. He divides such attitudes into three categories - exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism:[9] Gavin D'Costa criticizes this categorization and adds to it two more categories, comparative theology and postmodern postliberalism.[10] No doubt, Alan Race has made this typology in the context of the attitude of Christianity vis-à-vis other religions, but we can extend it in the case of other traditions also. There are certain other theologians who criticize this typology as either too simplistic or too restrictive but we must realize that each type of response can embrace several different forms. We tend to accept this typology simply for the reason that majority of the theologians all over the world have accepted it with minor variations in emphasis: among these theologians can be included the names of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, Paul Knitter, *et al.* In the following pages, we shall try to discuss and articulate these three different attitudes as they are found in all the major world religions during different phases of their history. In this chapter we shall take up only the Semitic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, leaving out religions of Indian origin including Sikhism which we shall take up for detailed discussion in the following chapters.

Each religious experience is a quest for ultimate reality or truth - understanding it, realizing it or being one with it. In the pursuit of this quest, adherents of different religions often tend to gloss over their similarities, and emphasize the differences amongst themselves. Since religion has a profound impact on people's beliefs and emotions, religious people often find it hard to be objective and dispassionate about the faiths of other people. Each religion requires strong commitment, and generally people avoid any serious attempt to understand a religion they do not belong to because it seems to them impossible to appreciate the faith of the others. However, we must realize, as says Niman Smart in his *Religious Experience*, that one's religious commitment should not blind one to the virtues of the faiths of others. Still it remains a

fact that people, generally speaking, tend to highlight the greatness or uniqueness of their respective religions vis-à-vis other traditions. Rather than attempting to reach to the others as human beings, each faith-community approaches others from their particular religious standpoint with the expectation to persuade the latter to agree to their point of view, to bring them into the fold of their own religion. They seem to forget that mutual witnessing promotes mutual respect whereas any attempt at proselytizing implies the inferiority of the faith of the other. This latter attitude no doubt devalues the faith of the other but also causes hurt to the others' sentiments. This creates unwanted apprehensions and bitterness among the latter, thus leading to disharmony and hatred between different faith-communities.

The protagonists of this view develop an inherent drive to the claims of uniqueness and universality for their faith and prophets. They exhibit an inner tendency to claim that their religion is the only true religion. It is their religion which offers the true revelation, which is the sole true way leading to man's spiritual emancipation. Their prophet or spiritual preceptor is the only saviour to lead humans on the way to salvation or self-realization: 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by whom we must be saved' is their usual refrain, if we put it in the words of Peter (4.12). Some missionaries, ecclesiastical leaders and theologians in different traditions have worked on these lines with such zeal as this thinking became an important aspect of theology in their traditions. Pope Boniface VIII is often cited as one who has stated the axiom in its strongest exclusivist sense:

> "We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic Church; we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins..." [11]

There can be several reasons for this attitude of uniqueness and superiority. One, protagonists of this view tend to compare their scriptural truth with the prevalent practices of others. Obviously, there is always a wide gap between the scriptural or doctrinal truth and prevalent practice. Two, each faith-community especially during the earlier stages of its evolution follows an ego-centric and aggressive posture vis-à-vis other faiths. Perhaps this kind of attitude at that earlier stage is unavoidable because each faith-community then feels unease in the face of some conservative forces of other prevailing religions; apprehending cultural and religious obliteration at their hands. When this attitude is adopted to serve some sectarian objectives, it becomes a cause for social strife. Third, this sort of attitude is sometimes adopted to justify the imperial expansionist policies of a particular religious community. The working together of the Western Christian missionaries and the British imperial government in India is a case in instance.

People with this sort of attitude, irrespective of what might be their religious persuasion, fail to accept the expression of ultimate reality or truth by any other religion as authentic except what their own religion has to say on this: rather, to them all other faiths are inauthentic and invalid and other faith-communities pagan. They assure a place in heaven for the "faithfuls" and condemn the "pagans" and "infidels" to ghetto in this world and hell hereafter. This sort of attitude, known as exclusivism in religious studies parlance, is not restricted to any particular religion, and in the following pages we shall discuss how some of the faith-communities have manifested this kind of attitude at some stage of their respective history, though this malady is more serious among 'missionary' religions.

The Jews during the medieval times adopted this exclusivistic attitude toward other religions. Maimonides (1135-1204), a very

important Jewish thinker, proclaimed Judaism to be the only faith revealed by God and the only religion true in every respect. Speaking about the difference between Judaism and other religions, he said:

> The difference between our religion and the other religions, to which it is sought to liken them, is none other than like the difference between the living, sentient man and the image carved by the workman from wood.[12]

Another Jewish theologian is a little more liberal and he treats both Judaism and Christianity as equally true and valid religions, but restricts the category of true religions only to these two traditions. Interestingly, he is of the view that it is only these two religions, Judaism and Christianity, which bring God and world together, and no other religion has been able to do that. He especially criticizes Islam (and implicitly various other religions also) for suffering from this failing. Referring to Islam, he says:

> [The Muslim] doesn't know, and cannot know, the quite other-worldly attitude of the soul that yet breathes the world with every breath....How that breathing of the world happens is the great contrast between Jew and Christian, but that it happens is their common ground. In Islam you will always find that God and the world remain perfectly apart, and so either the divine disappears in the world or the world disappears in God.[13]

This attitude was obvious in ancient and medieval Jewish thinking, though some modern scholars try to justify this kind of attitude as a historical necessity of those times. The argument commonly put forward is the need to preserve purity and identity of the tradition in the face of perceived or real threat from the prevalent religions. However, with the drastic change in religious scenario in the modern-day world, the Jewish attitude in regard to other religions is also undergoing a change. We shall take this up a little later.

Christianity was also no exception in this regard, and in ancient and medieval times its followers cultivated a strong belief in the myth of the superiority of their religion. Historically, the first major conflict within the early Christian church was on the question of it being either an independent, distinct faith or just a variant of Judaism. Although the former view soon prevailed and Christianity was able to free itself and get out of the Judaic umbrella yet such an endeavour involved putting forward the idea of the uniqueness of Christianity by claiming itself as the 'fulfilment' of Judaism. As Christianity moved into non-Jewish world, first of all it encountered Greek philosophy and religion. It was from the seventh century onwards that Christianity happened to face challenge from Islam. Prophet Muhammad respected Jesus, but only as a prophet and not as divine incarnation. During medieval times when Christianity once again resumed outward expansion in Europe and Asia and set up missions in countries like India and China, it encountered various Indian and Chinese religions. In spite of its continuous long contact with Islam and other Indian and Chinese religions during this period, Christianity retained its narrow exclusivistic attitude and shut itself off from any meaningful contact or dialogue with any other religion. During this time it was also accused of complicity with colonial powers in the denigration and destruction of cultures and religions of the colonized people. This attitude of Christianity being the norm for all other religions has been well summed up in the following words:

> What is truth in religion? is more urgent and more obscure than ever. This question is particularly urgent for Christianity, because it claims as its source and basis a divine revelation which at the same time is claimed to be the standard of reference for all truth and all religions.[14]

Several of the Christian theologians hold that Christianity is the absolute religion, intended for all men, and no other religion beside itself can be recognized as of equal right. However, Rahner

gives a little different twist to the meaning of exclusivism. According to him "this Chirstological affirmation does not limit salvation to those who have responded to the revelation in Christ. What it affirms is that salvation, wherever it may be said to be present, is always of Christ, for Christ alone is savour. Salvation is always Christian salvation because this is the meaning and definition God has chosen to give it by virtue of the Incarnation".[15] This Christocentric view remained popular for several centuries. This view in the Christian west often consigned other religions to spiritual darkness and their followers to damnation. According to this view, Jesus was the normative incarnation of the Logos for all religions. John's Gospel, says about Jesus "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me" (John 14.6). Also, in the Acts of Apostles, Peter says about Jesus that "there is no salvation in anyone else at all, for there is no other name under heaven granted to men, by which we may receive salvation." Jesus was identified with God, and certain words in the Bible, attributed to Jesus and often quoted in support of this claim, say: "I and the Father are one' (John 10.30) and 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14.9).

It resulted in a tendency especially among the Catholic church[16] to conceive itself as the one perfect society and frequently to identify itself with 'the kingdom of God' on earth. The myth of the uniqueness of Christianity, Jesus being the only Saviour and incarnation of the Logos persisted for long. The Council of Florence (1438-45) Declaration goes on to say that 'The holy Roman Church believes, professes and proclaims that none of those who are outside the church-not only pagans but Jews also, heretics and schismatics-can have part in eternal life, but will go to the eternal fire....unless they are gathered into church before the end of life.'[17] Even the Vatican II (1964) stated about those who strove by their deeds to do His Will but did not know (for no fault of their own) the gospel of Christ or His Church that "whatever

goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel."[18] When the Christian missionaries came over to the Asian countries, they worked in tandem with the colonial powers, aiming at helping their co-religionists in acquiring and then retaining political domination through cultural and religious dominance. They, however, presented their expansionist colonial designs as 'the white man's burden'. They preached the idea of power here and heaven hereafter for the 'faithfuls' and ghetto here and damnation hereafter for the 'pagans' and 'kafirs'.

Judaism and Christianity, the two major Semitic religions, did not come in direct contact with Sikhism during the time of its origin and evolution. The only Christian missionary to have commented on a major Sikh event during the time of its early evolution was Father Jerome Xavier, a Portugese Jesuit who had been working in India for more than a score of years. He happened to visit Lahore around the time of the martyrdom on 30 May 1606 of Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru of the Sikh faith. From Lahore he wrote a letter[19] on 25 September 1606 to the Jesuit Provincial Superior of Goa. This is a private letter, written in Portugese language and now preserved in the British Museum. It refers to several of the contemporary political events but is known among sikh schools especially for making a poignant reference to the martyrdom of the Guru. In the Sikh tradition, the Guru is spiritual-preceptor: since he is the instrument selected by God to communicate His message to mankind, Sikhism equates God (the source of message), the Word (the divine message) and the Guru (the medium who listens, articulates and conveys that message to mankind) and the Sikh scripture uses these words as synonyms at several places. In this letter, however, father Jerome Xavier fails to fully fathom the haloed persona of the Guru and calls him the 'Pope of the gentiles'. Still the letter is of much historical importance.

Islam, another Semitic religion, believes that the revelation its founder, Prophet Muhammad, had received was a continuation and fulfillment of the Jewish and Christian biblical tradition. One can perceive this in the Prophet's initial direction to his followers to face Jerusalem during prayers. It was only after certain Jewish protests that he ordered the Muslims to face Mecca while praying. Thus, the earlier openness toward Judaism and Christianity gradually hardened for certain other reasons as well, especially the Islamic requirement of absolute allegiance to one God. The Prophet also showed his respect to Jesus Christ, but acknowledged him a prophet, and not the incarnation of God. The Christian insistence on Jesus being the Son of God and the unbridgeable gulf in the Christian-Muslim understanding of the relationship between God and His creation (humankind) were not to the liking of Islam. Still Prophet Muhammad considered Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians as members of the tradition that was being completed through his own revelation.[20] That is why in the Islamic states later on the followers of these traditions were allowed to retain their faith provided they submitted to the Muslim government and also paid a special tax.

Historically, during the initial years of Islam, the attitude of Muslims towards other faiths and faith-communities was shaped by the images of the latter appearing in the Quran and by the attitudes of ecclesiastical and political leadership. They had the Quran and its approved commentaries as the only source of information about other religions. This led to a theology proclaiming Islam to be the full revelation and therefore the norm of all religions. This kind of approach continued up to and during early medieval times mainly because until then the Muslims lived either in self-enclosed Islamic states where they enjoyed absolute majority or in countries under their rule. Hence, there was little cultural, religious or political pressure against the prevalent myth of superiority. Paucity of authentic literature on other religions as

well as lack of opportunities of interaction with other faith-communities also contributed toward this conviction.

It was during the first half of the seventh century that Islam made its first contact with India when some Muslim Arabs reached the southern peninsula as traders. In the north-west of India, they first came as invaders with the sole intention of loot and plunder, but later on they began to conquer territory and finally settled as rulers of the land. They had been ruling for many years over India, including Punjab, the land where Sikhism originated and evolved, when Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh faith, was born. Ibrahim Lodhi of the Lodhi dynasty was the contemporary ruler who, like most other rulers of the Sultanate, was deeply committed to the Islamic *shari'at* laws and was rather severe in his treatment of his non-Muslim subjects. Destruction of all Hindu temples and other places of worship was an important aspect of his religious policy. It was also during the rule of the Lodhi dynasty that Babar (1483-1530), the Mughal ruler originally of Farghana in Central Asia and then of Kabul, raided India. One of the invasions of Babar and the death and destruction caused by it find a touching reference in some hymns of Guru Nanak-collectively known as 'Babar Vani' or Babar's Sway.[21]

Most of the Islamic scholars considered all other religions, both Semitic and Indian, as deviations from the one primordial religion of which Islam has been the full revelation. Thus they did not feel the need to study other religions.[22] They used to be judgmental about other religions without ever investigating whatever little factual information was available about the concerned religion. They called Christians tritheists, Jews corrupters of prophecy, Buddhists skeptics, and Hindus rationalists who denied prophecy. Almost until late medieval times, Muslims mainly lived either in self-enclosed Islamic states where they enjoyed absolute majority or in countries under their rule, they felt no cultural or political pressure to change their thinking. In

modern times, like any other religion of the world, Islam also finds itself in the unfamiliar position of a religion of the minority in many countries, especially in the West and India. Even in this situation Islam has resisted assimilation into the host culture, rather it has tried to reform itself in a way to conform to the religious ideals of Islam- the one true primordial religion.[23] This has posed serious problems for Islamic law (*shari'at*) in modern secular countries, especially with a majority of their population being non-Muslim.

The job of Islamic expansion in India fell to the rulers as well as to Sufi saints. With the sole exception of Emperor Akbar who followed a policy of religious tolerance, almost all other rulers and their theocratic advisers continued to maintain an attitude of religious exclusivism and intolerance toward other faiths and faith-communities. They considered other faith-communities as *kafir*.[24] It was felt that these *kafirs* were doomed to ghetto in this life and to hell hereafter whereas the believers were assured power here and pleasures of heaven hereafter. In fact, this attitude of the rulers seems to have been born of political expediency: their aim was the perpetuation of their rule, and they followed a policy which helped in realizing this aim. It was also this exclusivistic attitude of Islam which resulted in various confrontations with Sikhism which was apprehended by the contemporary rulers as a danger to the socio-political status-quo.

The Sufi saints contributed a lot by their efforts to present a different face of Islam. Their personal piety and feelings of love influenced many and brought to Islamic fold more people than the kings who tried to convert people with force. It will not be wrong to say that these Sufis played almost the same role which later on the Christian missionaries played to strengthen the Western Christian colonialism. No doubt, the efforts of these Sufi saints helped in bringing many into the Islamic fold, but all their efforts failed to persuade the mainstream Islam to have any meaningful

contact or dialogue with any of the indigenous religions. The Muslim clergy and elite not only refused to accept other religions as valid but also influenced the religious policy of the rulers of the day.

Hinduism, the oldest among religions of Indian origin, is more an amalgam of various traditions than just one religion. It is not possible to determine an exact date of its origin, nor is it possible to name any single text as its central scripture. Hinduism takes pride in calling itself pluralistic in the sense that it has easily absorbed unto itself various different traditions including those with even mutually contradictory doctrines. On the one hand, it considers different religions as different revelations of the One and different ways to attain the spiritual ideal, but, on the other hand, it asserts that the Vedas are the perfect revelation of divine truth and thus Hinduism presents itself as the criterion against which the revelations of all other religions need be tested. We shall take up the issue in detail as we deal with the Indian religious situation in the following chapter. Here it will suffice to say that its attitude towards Buddhism in earlier times and towards Sikhism in modern times falsifies its scriptural claims to being pluralistic as the term is taken to mean today.

Thus, we see that each of the major world religions has manifested, at one time or the other, the exclusivistic tendencies. Some of them, at least certain theologians in them tend to be exclusivistic even today. To them, their religion is the only valid path to God-realization or self-realization and their prophet is the only prophet to lead mankind on way to this realization. They consider their religion to be the full and final revelation, and thus the norm for all other religions. People outside of their own faith are taken as ineligible of being recipients of divine grace and ultimate salvation. Rather the other traditions are considered to actually lead man away from God. Thus, they aim at bringing people with different religious persuasions to the fold of their religion. Since proselytizing implies the invalidity/inferiority of other religions vis-

à-vis one's own, distrust and disharmony develop among different faith-communities, a feeling humankind can ill afford today.

The above descriptive definition of exclusivism has been generally accepted by most of the theologians. Alan Race, John Hick, Wilfred Smith and Paul Knitter are among the more important who agree with this. However, there are a few critics of this, and among them Gavin D'Costa further divides exclusivism into two sub-categoris-'restrictive-access exclusivism' and 'universal-access exclusivism'. The former view, according to him, holds that "God elected some for salvation and others for damnation. Because God is exclusively revealed in Jesus Christ (*solus Christus*), we can at least tell that non-Christians (and varying numbers of Christians who are unfaithful – and destined to be so) are destined for damnation."[25] This restricts the number of saved and damned as based on God's selection. The latter view says that since "God is exclusively revealed in Christ, only those who profess Christ can be saved, who hear the gospel (*fides ex auditu*) and confess it in their hearts."[26] Within this latter view is another difference of opinion whether the opportunity to confess Christ must take place for all before death or at the time of death or after death. However, both these views hold to *solus Christus* and *fides ex auditu*. However, it will tantamount to an unjustified theological imperialism if, in this age which values the historical and empirical, we say that one religion contains the fullest expression of religious truth and value, without any recourse to the empirical data of the other religions themselves.

III

Changes in social life brought about by the recent developments especially in the fields of transportation and communication have made different faith-communities have a re-think on their attitude toward other religions. Earlier the European Enlightenment (17th-18th centuries) had resulted in the Western realization that "Christendom is part of a much larger human world, with great

civilizations having existed outside it, above all in China and India as well as the Islamic world."[27] Along with this also came the realization that "Christianity is one world religion amongst others."[28] Some later developments like the explosion of authentic literature about all religions, travel facilities resulting in frequent inter-community contacts and massive migrations especially from East to West have also made many theologians rethink and re-do their theologies. The availability of authentic literature about different religions and close mutual interaction between different faith-communities have made everybody realize that "people of other faiths are not on average noticeably better human beings than Christians, nor on the other hand are they on average noticeably worse human beings."[29] Almost the same virtues and vices are found among people belonging to different religious traditions.

No doubt, these developments have had their universal impact, but the effect has not been to the same degree in each region and on each faith-community. In the early modern period, the Christian exclusivist theology began to be challenged both from within and without. Some of the Christian theologians came down from their conviction of 'particularity' that 'salvation has been made effective in the world only through its embodiment in the person of Jesus Christ.' This gave birth to several new developments in the field of theology. In an attempt to overcome the weaknesses in the earlier Christocentric approach which identified God with Jesus Christ, thus giving birth to the exclusivistic attitude, they now articulated theocentric approach which lays emphasis on God, thus opening ways to other theocentric religions like Judaism, Islam, Sikhism and some types of Hinduism. We find change in the Muslim attitude as well: for example, writings of Ahmad Amin, an Egyptian Muslim scholar of the early 20th century, show an obvious shift in Islamic thought to a more open attitude towards other religions, especially Christianity.[30]

As a result of these developments, we come across another category of scholars and theologians who are somewhat tolerant of other religions, but still feel that truth is limited to their faith only. They also favour dialogue with other religions. The object of religion should be to meet together and explore different claims about ultimate reality in a context of mutual respect. We expect from dialogue an appreciation of the insights and experiences people of other faiths have of ultimate reality. However, these inclusivists prefer a dialogue the result of which is understandably pre-determined in their favour. This shift, however, represents a change from one's all-knowing 'let us teach you' attitude to 'listening to whatever wisdom comes from the other tradition'. Karl Rahner's 'anonymous Christian' is also indicative of this attitude when he refers to 'ordinary' way of salvation of common man and the 'very special and extraordinary' way of salvation in the Church, thereby bringing the relationship between Christianity and the other faiths to that of 'complete to incomplete', 'explicit to implicit'. 'open to anonymous'.[31] Rahner is careful to safeguard the superiority of Christianity: the individual who is exposed to God's grace through Christianity has, other things being equal, a greater chance of salvation than someone who is merely an anonymous Christian, a member of another religion.[32] John Hick does not agree with this thinking and describes it as 'an honorary status' (anonymous Christian) granted unilaterally to people who have not expressed any desire for it.'

This attitude in the Christian theology of religions is both an acceptance and a rejection of the other faiths. On the one hand, it accepts the spiritual power and depth manifest in other religions, so that they can also be called a locus of divine presence. On the other hand, it rejects them as not being sufficient for salvation apart from Christ, for Christ alone is the Saviour. This attitude has been named inclusivism. To be an inclusivist is to believe that all non-Christian religious truth belongs ultimately to Christ, and

the way of discipleship which springs from him. The Acts of the Apostles is a fruitful source for those who seek New Testament backing for a more positive and inclusivist appreciation of the operation of God's Spirit outside Christianity. In the Cornelius narrative, Peter says: 'Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (10.35).

Another Christian theologian divides inclusivist thinkers into two categories - structural inclusivists and restrictivist inclusivists. According to him, the former hold that "Christ is the normative revelation of God, although salvation is possible outside of the explicit Christian church. Salvation is, or may be, available through other religions, *per se*, but this salvation is always from Christ."[33] This gives pluralist legitimation of other religions as salvific structures while also holding to the exclusivist claims of the causal saving grace of Christ alone. On the other hand, the restricitivist inclusivists "do not give legitimation to other religions as possible or actual salvific structures."[34]

This change in attitude from exclusivism to inclusivism is aptly summed up in the outcome of the second Vatican Council (1963-65) also. It says that "the faith that I have in Christ and his good news is so important that I am compelled-necessity is laid upon me - to share it with all people. But I trust I can listen to your story and respect your integrity, even though having listened I may still want to present to you, as to all, the claims of my Lord." This obviously creates a difficult-to-resolve contradiction between the traditional insistence on the ontological necessity of Christ for salvation and belief in the universal salvific will of the Christian God. Protagonists of this attitude have tried to overcome this contradiction by seeking to combine universality with particularity. This has been a step down from particularity toward universality. We can also say that the inclusivist attitude is a sort of bridge between the no longer acceptable exclusivism and the

newly emerging standpoint of pluralism. According to this school, people of other faiths are no more looked down upon as pagans but at the same time their religion is not taken as equally valid and true: the ultimate truth lies only with their own faith and that salvation is also possible only through their faith. They still conceive their religion as one religion among many without either sacrificing their religion's normative significance as a universal way or downgrading other religions as penultimate versions of their own faith. This is akin to what a Christian theologian says about the role of Christ and Christianity in the salvation of others: "It is Christ alone who is received as light when grace visits a Brahman, a Buddhist and a Muhammadan reading his own scriptures".[35]

As in the case of exclusivism, the votaries of this point of view are also found among many of the religions especially of the missionary category. The Christian theologians belonging to this school now agree that there should be no attempt to pressurize or manipulate, for that itself would contradict the spirit of the gospel. In fact, there must be a persevering and painstaking effort to communicate, the aim being to help the people really grasp the message of God's love and mercy in Christ and to respond to it as free persons. One of the Indian pioneers of interfaith dialogue in church, Israel Selvanayagam, considers his life-long understanding of Christianity a journey made with confidence, with humility and joy, with openness. He goes on, in an inclusivistic vein, to admit of those who are on a Hindu journey, a Muslim journey, and so on, but he firmly believes that all the different paths do not lead independently to the Divine, but they all will finally join at the crucified centre of Christ.[36] Panikkar reiterates the same idea when he says:

> The good and *bona fide* Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the Sacraments of Hinduism, through the *Mysterion* that comes to him through Hinduism, that *Christ* saves the Hindu normally.[37]

The advocates of this inclusivist attitude also tend to be overzealous while presenting their viewpoint and under-rating, without explicitly saying so, the ideologies and cultures of others. They overlook the fact that respect for the religious sensibilities of others is the most fundamental thing to bring about and maintain harmony and peace in society. Any attempt-conscious or unconscious, covert or overt – at under-rating the other religions is sure to lead to antagonism and bitterness in human social relations. We must avoid comparing our scriptural or doctrinal ideal with the practices of the others since there is ever a wide gap between the ideals and practices: practice is never identical with the ideal in the case of any religion. Rather we should try to see for ourselves how far our own practiced religion falls short of its own ideals, precepts and professions. The myth of religious superiority needs to be given up.

Like the exclusivistic attitude, this kind of attitude could go on unchallenged at the most until the faith-communities (e.g. Christians and Muslims) given to this thinking remained confined to states where they enjoyed numerical majority or where they enjoyed absolute political authority. Such an attitude, caused partly by the lack of authentic information/knowledge about other religions, was also used to provide sanction to their colonial expansionist designs. However, in modern times people of different denominations have so spread themselves throughout the world that no faith-community can claim a status of majority everywhere: a faith-community which is in majority in one region or country finds itself in minority, sometimes in hopeless minority, in some other region/country. Maintenance of such an attitude when you are part of a numerical minority is neither possible nor practicable. If a faith-community persists with this attitude in spite of the changes in the human social situation brought about by the process of globalization, this is bound to result in the severe deterioration of harmony and trust in interfaith relations. In the modern-day

world "it is not morally possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: 'We are saved and you are dammed'; or, 'We believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong'".[38]

IV

In the preceding two sections, we have tried to give descriptive definitions of exclusivism and inclusivism. As it is, exclusivism and inclusivism are essentially two sides of the same coin. They are distinguished mainly in their slightly different attitudes towards other faith-traditions as valid vehicles of what a pluralist theologian calls 'transcendent vision and human transformation'. Still it is true that each religion is an attempt at comprehending the ultimate Reality and that each religion takes in life as a whole and recommends ways and means for eco-human welfare. The only difference is that each religion 'entails many metaphysical and other disagreements' in the articulation of what is 'transcendent' and in making recommendations for 'human transformation'.

No religion has ever come out of a vacuum and, as we have said earlier, each religion arose in a religiously plural environment. No religion can formulate its theology in isolation of other religions. Mutual interaction amongst the plurality of religions is beneficial to all sides involved in the interaction: the spiritual wisdom of other religions is sure to enrich our own. It will not be wrong to say that the creative tension generated by interation amongst the plurality of religions has often acted as a catalyst for new insights and religious developments. If we hear God's word in religions other than our own, we are sure to receive stimulation for creative development within our own tradition. On the other hand, there have been occasions in the history of world religions when lack of pluralistic challenges often signaled a period of spiritual stagnation. In fact, future developments in each theology are sure

to be the direct result of serious dialogue with other religions because the task of theology is to open one's religion to another religious tradition. The encounter among the plurality of religions should not be treated as a threat but must be taken as a promise.

The need of the moment is not one world-religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of all the different prevailing religions. Any attempt to root out the multiplicity is not only bound to fail but is also a sacrilege. Truth cannot be taken as the exclusive property of any single faith or scripture or prophet. Even the Christian mission tried more than a century back to redefine its missionary task in the light of tolerance, and a report published by the Layman's Missionary Movement of North American said:

> It is clearly not the duty of the Christian missionary to attack other faiths.... The Christian will regard himself as a co-worker with the forces within each religious system which are working for righteousness.[39]

Implicit in this is the need for acceptance and tolerance of the plurality of religions.

Acceptance of the plurality of religions does not imply, as some people take it to mean, the 'coalescence' of all world religions; rather it implies understanding between all religions. Each religion accepts the fact that the ultimate Reality is limitless and it has not been possible to either describe or comprehend it fully. That is why different religions of the world only refer to the "religious reality, but they are presumed...not to describe that reality truly, in [full] detail and with any certainty, since no one can do that."[40] In other words, it can also be said that knowledge of God in all faiths is partial, and followers of one religion must acknowledge the need of other religions to have at least more, if not full, knowledge of God. No religion can claim to be the final locus of religious truth. The crucial point here is that one needs to have conviction and commitment without fanaticism.

This tolerance and acceptance of other faiths ought not to be passive because it will make all religions relative. This will, as says Alan Race, undermine concern to distinguish good from bad in a religion's thought or practice insofar as it affects eco-human welfare. This "could also imply the first step towards an undifferentiated syncretism...."[41] This could also lead to another premise: if all religions are equally true, then all religions are equally false. The differences among the varied religions are inevitable and they go only to reveal the richness of the eternal and infinite truth. A theologian has tried to explain this with the metaphor of a tree: the varied religions are compared to the branches of the tree which obviously look different but have the same source for their sustenance. The metaphor could be further extended by calling all humans as leaves on those branches which are also apparently diverse and different but are nourished by the same one source. No difference whatsoever in any way diminishes the significance or value of a particular religion vis-a-vis any other. Despite all religions being different, we must acknowledge that the universe of faiths centres upon ultimate Reality/Truth/God and not upon any other particular prophet or scripture. This has been contrary to the earlier Christocentric view, and this shift is what John Hick calls "a Copernican revolution" in the study of theology of religions.

In other words, we can say that all historical religions are, by definition, finite and particular, and that only God is infinite. Each religious experience has its own particularity, but each religious experience is also complementary and not mutually exclusive. No doubt, each religious experience represents genuine encounter with the one ultimate divine reality but it is also true that each religion defines itself according to its own intrinsic impulse as well as in relation to its environment, including other religions. The suggestion that God is experienced in different forms according to different cultural environments involves a distinction between 'God as infinite being' and 'God as finitely

experienced'. From the phenomenological point of view, this distinction is present in all the major religions. On the one hand, God is beyond conceptualizing powers of the human mind. On the other hand, He is related to or worshipped through human perceptions or images which are sometimes personal and sometimes impersonal. Both the personal and impersonal conceptions of God are, however, human images and valid ways of approaching the one ultimately indescribable divine reality. This attitude rejects the abuse and manipulation of the sacramental basis of religion and is against those who limit the experience of the divine to any particular manifestation of it.

This also implies the need to understand and appreciate the religious beliefs and practices of others. While trying to understand and examine the faith of the other, one obviously cannot put his own faith in parenthesis, but one must listen attentively to the faith of the other as this is unfolded by the believer himself, without prejudging that faith and without abandoning one's own commitment. This is a very delicate task as a theologian has stated about half a century back: "Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival."[42] We must ever bear in mind that when we revere another people's religion or show honour to the place of worship of another faith community, we revere or respect the Divine presence itself; on the other hand, if we revile another's religion or desecrate the place of worship of another faith community, we revile or desecrate the Divine Presence itself. Thus, we must learn and adopt the attitude of accepting and respecting other faiths and faith communities. That is the only way to accept and acknowledge the presence of God in all beings and at all places.

However, our knowledge and understanding should not be confined only to the knowledge and understanding of other religious systems and their doctrines and beliefs. It would mean confronting a religious truth in the abstract. Rather it should also include in its area of study a knowledge of the people belonging to other faiths. Unfortunately, in spite of this wide world having been transformed into a global village by the revolutionary attainments in the fields of travel and communication, we are still prone to consider our neighbour an alien, belonging to a different culture and religion. Instead of developing a dialogical relationship with him so as to make our social existence meaningful and peaceful, we prefer to erect in between a wall of religious/cultural differentiation and superiority. We need to rend this wall, initiate dialogue and participate in the beliefs and practices of others.

It is a universally accepted fact now that culture or religion has nothing to do with a man being better or worse than anybody else. Birth in a family/country/culture is a matter of chance whereas faith or religion is a matter of choice with humans. In fact, the close interaction between people belonging to different religions, races and cultures has also provided us a new spirit of option in religious and ideological commitment. This has been the cause of a lot of misunderstanding among people of different religious persuasions today, but we can rationalize it only if our understanding of and obedience to the Word of God goes side by side the living contexts of faiths of our neighbours. Since all religions are an attempt at understanding the same Truth/Divine, human beings belonging to these varied religious traditions are also equally good or bad. People of our faith are not on average noticeably either better or worse human beings than those of others.

In Christian theology, the earlier Christocentric focus often served to hide the conscious or unconscious desire of Christianity to dominate other traditions which was further taken to justify the subordination and exploitation of other cultures and peoples.

The title of 'the son of God and the second person of divine trinity' was attributed to Jesus though he himself never claimed it during his lifetime. In fact, this title and the myth of Christian uniqueness have been later developments. A Christian theologian has rejected these developments in a rather harsh tone saying that these developments came about when the followers had lost or corrupted the original revelation and fallen into doctrinal error. Gradually, this gave way to the theocentric approach which involved searching for a common God dwelling within different religious communities. What we need in the modern-day world is 'globally responsible' dialogue which is "mutual, back and forth, co-relationship of speaking and listening, teaching and learning, witnessing and being witnessed to". In such a dialogue, no participant will speak his truth-claim from a theological position that is meant to dominate or absorb or stand in judgement over others: it is an egalitarian approach which has salvation or well-being of both humans and earth as the starting point and common ground for our efforts to understand other faiths.

As we said earlier, our acknowledgement of the fact of religious plurality must not be blind and passive: it needs to be critical. Of course, the former attitude is easier to imbibe, but it would imply closing one's eyes to any in-built measures in a religion which support policies of oppression and exploitation of the common man, especially the subaltern classes. Generally, such measures become part of the practices at the encouragement of the elitist class/caste groups which, with a view to retaining the status quo, try to derive strength from a metaphysical doctrine. Such practices must be analyzed critically, exposed and condemned without, of course, rejecting all that is good in that religion. For example, a system like that of *varna asrama dharma* built in a religious tradition to suit the vested interests of an elite group and to exploit and oppress a particular group must not be accepted at its face value. The latter also happen to be a marginalized section

in society, and religion has to work for their uplift and betterment. Sincere efforts must be made to rectify such measures because it is by exposing and condemning such man-made structures that a lasting peace and harmony in human social relations can be brought about.

History stands witness that no prophet, no founder of any faith the world over was ever exclusivist in his approach toward mankind. Whatever these prophets said or did was never meant for only a particular group based on either colour or race or language or any such thing, rather they stood for the welfare of the entire humankind and the whole earth. The responsibility for the creation of boundaries between different faith-communities lies with the adherents of these prophets and founders. They do so in their bid to prove the superiority of their religion and prophet. In many cases, particular historical circumstances determined the attitude of one faith-community toward the others. The myth of religious superiority and uniqueness came about (in the case of some religions) to dominate the others and (in the case of some others) to survive and keep its own identity in tact. In today's world different faith-communities inter-penetrate and inter-act with one another on daily basis. They cannot afford to live in isolation of each other nor can they even be indifferent to the concerns and interests of each other. They can no more afford to clash, rather they must learn to live with this religious plurality, if they want to live in peace and harmony.

Thus, we tend to reject the myth of Christian or Islamic or Hindu or Buddhist or Sikh uniqueness: the notion of religious superiority is just a false myth. No religion can lay claim to be the full and final revelation of truth and thus be the norm for others. The great world religions with their diverse teachings and practices constitute authentic paths to the supreme good, and they should be accepted and appreciated as such. As it is, no universally acceptable definition of religious pluralism has yet been arrived

at. The different definitions articulated by different scholars agree in regard to the issue of acceptance and appreciation of religious plurality though they do differ only in their emphasis on one or the other aspect. A conclave of pluralist thinkers from all major religious traditions of the world, convened by Professor John Hick at the University of Birmingham in September 2003, resolved to put down the key principles of religious pluralism as under:

1. Inter-religious dialogue and engagement should be the way for religions to relate to one another. A paramount need is for religions to heal antagonisms among themselves.
2. The dialogue should engage the pressing problems of the world today, including war, violence, poverty, environmental devastation, gender, injustice, and violation of human rights.
3. Absolute truth claims can easily be exploited to incite religious hatred and violence.
4. The religions of the world affirm ultimate reality/truth which is conceptualised in different ways.
5. While ultimate reality/truth is beyond the scope of complete human understanding, it has found expression in diverse ways in the world's religions.
6. The great world religions with their diverse teachings and practices constitute authentic paths to the supreme good.
7. The world's religions share many essential values, such as love, compassion, equality, honesty, and the ideal of treating others as one wishes to be treated oneself.
8. All persons have freedom of conscience and the right to choose their own faith.
9. While mutual witnessing promotes mutual respect, proselytising devalues the faith of the other.

These key principles of pluralism also find a place in *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, a collection of select papers presented at the above-mentioned seminar[43]. They suggest that pluralism provides validity to all faiths. Pluralism considers all

religions authentic and genuine, and helpful in realizing salvation for man. It holds that "there can never be just one of anything. . . . The one-way road is most likely the road to destruction. Perhaps this is the abiding meaning of the story of the Tower of Babel; the Lord God warned against the havoc inherent in all dreams or projects for a monolithic, one-way vision of reality."[44] This is quite akin to what Abraham Heschel means when he says that "God's voice speaks in many languages, communicating itself in a diversity of intuitions. The word of God never comes to an end. No word is God's last word."[45]

Obviously, all religions share something common among themselves and they make common reference to a single, transcendent reality."[46] Still they have genuine differences, for each religion is a different historical manifestation of that reality and it presents visions of God, world and humanity from a localized, historically particular perspective. All great world religions with their diverse teachings and practices constitute authentic paths to the supreme good. Different religions share many essential values, such as love, compassion, equality, honesty, and the ideal of treating others as one wishes to be treated oneself. All persons have freedom of conscience and the right to choose their own faith. While mutual witnessing promotes mutual respect, proselytizing devalues the faith of the other.

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1. Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Tr. Alfred Josephe), 107
2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, 11
3. Alan Race, *Interfaith Encounter*, 14
4. Marcus Braybrooke, "Religion and conflict" in Dharam Singh, Ed., *Interfaith Dialogue: Different Perspectives*, 7
5. For detailed discussion on this topic, see Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York:

Simon and Schuster, 1996). Also, see Samuel Huntington, Ed., *The Clash of Civilizations: The Debate* (New York: Foreign Affairs, 1996)

6. Fundamentalism is essentially oppositional, rejects new ways of thinking as well as any change to one's religious beliefs, and adopts a-historical attitude to the central truths of one's religion.
7. Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions*, 21
8. C.W. Watson, *Multiculturalism*, 5
9. For detailed discussion on this categorization, see his book *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 2nd ed. 1994. The phraseology was appreciatively used by John Hick (*The Rainbow of Faiths*, London: SCM, 1985) and Paul F. Knitter (*No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).
10. Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions – Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions*, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 6
11. Quoted in Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 10
12. A. Cohen, *The Teachings of Maimonides*, 116-17
13. Rosenzweig, *Judaism Despite Christianity*, 68
14. Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 106
15. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 45
16. Exclusivism was not confined to Catholic church only; the same note was dominant in the three great Protestant International Missionary Conferences at Edinburgh (1910), Jerusalem (1928), and Tambaram (1938). It also formed the predominant attitude of the World Council of Churches, at least up to 1966. However, a new departure was inaugurated when the Central Committee, at their meeting in Addis Ababa in 1971, first adopted an 'interim' policy statement and guidelines on dialogue with members of other faiths and ideologies.
17. Quoted in Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, 97
18. For complete text, see John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 125f
19. For detailed discussed and English translation of the letter, see D.R. Hambye, s.j., "A Contemporary Jesuit Document on Guru Arjan Dev's

Martyrdom", in Harbans Singh and N.G. Barrier, Eds., *Punjab Past and Present: Essays in Honour of Dr Ganda Singh*, 113-18

20. J.A. Hutchinson, *Paths of Faith*, 400
21. Four hymns, collectively known as "*Babar Vani*" are available in the Guru Granth Sahib, at pages 360, 417-18 and 722-23
22. Harold Coward, *Pluralism in the World Religions - A Short Introduction*, 61
23. *Ibid.*, 81
24. The word '*kafir*' has been used in the Quran in the sense of a non-believer, one who does not believe in one God. The relevant Surah, No. 109, reads as follows:

 Say: O unbelievers!
 I do not serve that which you serve,
 Nor do you serve Him whom I serve;
 Nor am I going to serve that which you serve;
 Nor are you going to serve Him whom I serve;
 You shall have your religion and I shall have my religion.

 See M.H. Shakir, tr., The Koran, 422
25. Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions – Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions*, 7
26. *Ibid.*
27. John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 12
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 13
30. *Pluralism in World Religions*, op. cit., 71
31. *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 51
32. K.R. Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" in *Christianity and Other Religions*, 76-77
33. Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions – Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions*, 7
34. *Ibid.*
35. George Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World" as quoted in Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 50

36. Israel Selvanayagam, *A Second Call*, 103
37. Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 54
38. W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, 130-131
30. W.E. Hocking, Rethinking Mission, 327
40. Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism*, 202
41. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 78
42. M.A.C. Warren, General Introduction to the "Christian Presence" Series, ff.
43. Paul Knitter, *Myth of Religious Superiority*, New York: Orbis Books, 2005
44. Paul Knitter, 6
45. Abraham Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays in Applied Religion*, 182
46. This is a general statement. A caveat to this claim must be entered in the case of certain traditions (e.g. the *sramanic* Indian traditions) which tend to deny the existence of positive reality denoted by words for the sacred.

Chapter II

INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER : INDIAN CONTEXT

I

As we said in the preceding chapter, history of religion has been as old as that of humankind. It is also a fact of history that each religion was born into a religiously plural world and developed throughout its history in that context. At the same time, however, religious beliefs and practices of people living in different regions and eras have generally differed from those of one another. In ancient times, these differences did not widely affect human social relations because people then lived isolated in their respective small religious and cultural groups. Lack of any efficient means of communication and transportation kept them blissfully ignorant of what kind of cultures or religions existed or happened outside of their limited geographical universe. But the advancement especially in the fields of information technology and transportation has now made different faith-communities have closer interaction among themselves. Unlike in ancient times, they cannot remain oblivious of the fact of religious plurality and its theological and social implications.

Religious plurality is not peculiar or special to any particular country of the world today. There is hardly a country today where all of its inhabitants have the same religious beliefs and practices. Even within the same faith-community, there are different beliefs and practices, thus further dividing the community into groups and sub-groups. The recent developments in the fields of transportation and communication and various other factors have transformed the world into a global village and the entire humankind into a global community. This has brought these

different faith-communities close together – physically, at least. Most of the countries in the world today have multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual societies. For example, in England, people follow more than 170 distinct different faiths or belief-systems.[1] The Canadian population, as per a study, is composed of 164 diverse ethnic groups. India has the unique distinction of being a country where more than one religions have originated and flourished. After this transformation of society, we need to get out of the era of 'monologue' and enter into the new age of 'dialogue' - dialogue between different faiths and faith-communities. Earlier, humans talked with others who were much like them, but in the modern-day situation they have to learn to dialogue and interact with others who are different from them, religiously and culturally.

Religious plurality in a given social situation is not a liability, rather it is a great source of enrichment for society, for the entire humanity. This plurality needs be accepted as such: if political differences are taken as a normal phenomenon, religious differences also be viewed with the same indulgence.[2] It is important that people from every faith-community feel valued as individuals with their own distinct religious beliefs and practices. They should have the freedom of conscience and of following their own beliefs, with the only stipulation that this should not affect the freedom of others. Equally important is the fact that they should be encouraged to make, in their own way, their contribution towards eco-human welfare. No doubt, there has now begun some social intercourse between people of different religions, but it is still not enough. Limiting the participation in inter-faith movements and in the activities of the inter-religious organization to religious leaders alone will not suffice: we need to encourage individual believers. This will help us cultivate a feeling of fellowship for those belonging to other faith-communities. The sanctity of human life needs to be affirmed, irrespective of the

religious denomination of the individual: the basis for this affirmation ought to be the belief in the universal fatherhood of God and universal brotherhood of mankind, God being the Father of entire humanity and the latter being His children as well as equal partners in His bounty. Cultivation of these values is required for developing cordial inter-religious relations and making human life happy and meaningful.

As we said, religions vary in varied places. The place and role of religion also varies in varied societies and civilizations. A scholar[3] has made a very appropriate comment on what constitutes culture in the west as well as in the east. He says that western culture has two fundamental sources which it has never entirely fused – one from Greece and Rome and the other from Palestine. These two traditions have sometimes been in conflict, sometimes in harmony, sometimes one tends to dominate, sometimes the other; often the two have intertwined, but they have never coalesced. Westerners have two loyalties - one to religion and the other to their secular heritage. So religion is just one factor in civilization in the West. On the other hand, in the east, religion is not just one element in civilization, rather it has been the form of that civilization. Ideally, it has been the pattern of whatever meaning the other patterns in social life have. This shows how vitally different is the place of religion in the eastern societies as compared with the western world.

Looking at the issue from the limited Indian perspective, we know that there have been four major religions of Indian origin. They include Jainism and Buddhism from the *sramanic* tradition, Hinduism and Sikhism. Two of the Semitic religions, Islam and Christianity, now have their followers in significant numbers in India. Both of these came to India first as traders and gradually settled down as conquerors and rulers of the country. The history of relationships among religions of Indian origin and between Indian religions on the one hand and Semitic religions on the other

makes an interesting study. The former are product of the same culture yet they differ from one another on several points in the articulation of their respective metaphysics and social philosophy. The Semitic religions originated in entirely alien cultures, and both of them happened to be missionary faiths. Thus, they strongly believed in the myth of their uniqueness and superiority vis-à-vis Indian religions. Consequently, their relationship with the latter was never smooth and harmonious.

A study of the history of religious life in India reveals that the *sramanic* tradition has been the oldest. No doubt, it is a fact that the Rig Veda is the oldest extant religious literature in India and is also believed to be the first scripture of the Hindus. But we find in the Rig Veda references to certain *sramanas*, implying thereby that the *sramanic* tradition existed prior to the Vedic era. The reference especially to Muni Rishabhadeva, who is believed to be the first Tirathankara of Jainism, in the Rig Veda has been an ample proof to the effect that the *sramanic* tradition is pre-Vedic and that the first Tirathankara of Jainism also lived prior to the Rig Veda. However, the first twenty-three Tirathankaras of Jainism, following one after the other with long intervals of time, have been persons from the pre-historic era and only the twenty-fourth Tirathankara, Lord Mahavira (c599-527 BCE) is a historical personage. Another set of historians argue that Jainism begins with Lord Mahavira who belongs not only to post-Vedic but also post-Upanishadic period. The *sramanic* tradition may be older but Jainism is younger to Hinduism, runs this refrain.

Another religion which forms part of the *sramanic* tradition is Buddhism, founded by Gautama Buddha (c563-483 BCE). Buddha recognized no spirit or soul as distinct from material organization, and no supreme Spirit. That is perhaps why some scholars feel "Buddhism is no religion at all, and certainly no theology, but rather a system of duty, morality, and benevolence, without real deity, prayer or priest."[4] According to Buddhism,

actions, good or bad, lead to repeated existences whereas the great end and object of every human life has been to attain non-existence (*nirvana*) by self-abnegation, meditation and the suppression of all action. It not only rejected the revelatory character of the Vedas but also rejected caste system and declared atoning sacrifice as meaningless and useless. The penalty of sin cannot be transferred to another – it must be borne by the sinner himself just as the reward of virtue is also enjoyed by the virtuous man himself.

Hinduism does not have an easily identifiable beginning and records of its early history are not traceable.[5] For this reason, it has by many historians of religion been called the oldest not only among religions of Indian origin but among the major religions of the world also. Though it agreed with *sramanic* religions in regard to the *karma* (the mental trace or seed left behind by each thought or action that predisposes one to a similar thought or action in the future; volition; action), *samsara* (the world of phenomena, which is incessantly in motion or flux and of which rebirth is an aspect) and *jiva* (the empirical self, the individual soul) being *anadi* (beginningless) and that by following a particular spiritual path (*marga*) release could be realized. However, each of them posed a different understanding of the Divine/Absolute or Truth to be experienced at the end of the spiritual path. The Brahmanical tradition conceived reality as "pure being" or a pure unchanging substance, a concept found expressed in the *atma* doctrine of the Upanisads. Buddhism takes an entirely opposite view in regard to its perception of reality, and we find that Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions to a large extent shaped each other through mutual opposition and debate. On the other hand, the Jaina view "may be said to constitute the third stream of Indian philosophy–lying mid-way between the two extremes.[6]

Hinduism has an all-absorbing nature, and has absorbed unto itself several different, and sometimes mutually contradictory,

traditions from atheistic to pantheistic, to deistic to monistic to mystical. It accepts each of these as true within its own perspective. The conflict between the truth of one of these viewpoints with that of the other is expected because each viewpoint is only a partial perspective of the Divine. Consequent upon this conflicting nature of the various doctrines included as part of it, some scholars have even refused to consider Hinduism a religion in the sense other religions of the world are, and have called it a composite of many paths, all of which [it believes] can lead to reality, God, deliverance or self-realization. As it is, the followers of Hinduism have always remained numerically a dominant majority in India whereas Buddhism became extinct in the land of its origin and Jainism has always remained an insignificant numerical minority.

II

In the dominant Hindu view, the different religions are understood as different and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the one divine reality. In fact, divinity is sometimes described as 'that in which opposites co-exist.' We can give the example of a sculpture being looked at from different angles - front, back, sides. Though these different views of the various perceivers might seem different and even incompatible but the fact remains that each one of these descriptions is correct, though only partially. It believes that it is only an insightful study of all these descriptions which can help prepare a reliable overall picture of the sculpture. Another example given is that of some blind men trying to describe an elephant after each one of them has been able to feel only a different part of the animal's body. Obviously, all their descriptions of the elephant will be different from one another but each one of them will contain truth, partial truth though. The Rig Vedic hymn-*ekam sat vipraha bahuda vadanti*, i.e. Truth is one and sages call it by many names' is also interpreted to support this view.

According to this logic, Hinduism can be taken as tolerant and open to other religions as it takes other traditions as additional

visions of the same divine reality. It implies that the more aspects of the Divine we perceive, the more complete our understanding will be. However, there is a qualifying clause in classical Hinduism which considers Vedic revelation as the norm for other religions. Hindus consider the Vedas to be eternal, impersonal (not composed by any person or god) and the most perfect revelation of divine truth. From the Vedas comes all knowledge of *dharma*, and without the Vedas relase (*moksa*) is not possible. This brings out the Hindu view of the scriptures of other religions. Hinduism is thus, tolerant - in practice – but only so long as the other tradition is willing to accept its status of a sect under the broader umbrella of Hinduism.

On the one hand, Hinduism believes that all paths, within the broader framework of Hinduism, lead to the Divine, and it matters little as to which path a seeker takes. Thus, any proselytizing, especially through the use of force, of one faith-community by the other becomes indefensible and uncalled for because proselytizing involves grading the religions, calling one better or worse than the other. Hinduism, therefore, did not favour the conversion of individuals or groups from other religions.[7] On the other hand, Hinduism has always been averse to the idea of any tradition originating in India claiming the status of a distinct, independent religion outside of the Hindu umbrella. Thus, its endeavour has ever been to absorb the entire tradition unto itself, calling it a part of Hinduism. That is why Hinduism today is an amalgam of various different and even mutually contradictory ideologies.

For example, during the early phase of Buddhism, Hinduism made many efforts to oppose, liquidate and absorb Buddhism unto itself. Buddhism was a proselytizing religion and could thus prove a potential threat to Hinduism. To overcome any such attempt by Buddhism, Hinduism tried to assimilate the Buddha into the Vaishnava pantheon as an incarnation of Vishnu but this

did not attract enthusiasm. The worship of the Buddha by non-Buddhists remained largely formal and deferential. The militaristic ethos of the [Hindu] Rajputs was incompatible with the emphasis on non-violence of the Shramanic religions, even though some Jainas distinguished themselves on the battlefield."[9] The *Visnu Purana*, one of the sacred Hindu sacred texts, narrates this account as follows:

> When the mighty Visnu heard their request [the request of the gods to be protected from the *asuras*], he emitted from his body an illusory form which he gave to the gods and thus spake: 'This deceptive vision [Buddha] shall wholly beguile the *asuras*, so that, being led astray from the path of the Vedas, they may be put to death; for all gods, demons or others who shall be opposed to the authority of the Vedas shall perish by my might, whilst exercised for the preservation of the world. Go then, and fear not; let his illusive vision precede thee; it shall this day be of great service to you, O gods![10]

Thereafter, the *Visnu Purana* goes on to narrate how Visnu, incarnated as Buddha, succeeds in seducing all the *asuras* away from their study of the Vedas and their proper social duties by promising them a secret path to liberation and teaching the equal truth of contradictory tenets. The intent is obvious. Buddhism does not believe in the Vedas or their revelatory character and, for the Hindu theologians, those who do not believe in the Vedas are *asuras* or demons. Buddha is declared an incarnation of a Hindu deity who came to the earth with a specified job of maneuvering people to go 'astray from the path of the Vedas' and them by putting them to death. Obviously, the *Visnu Purana* is an attempt at making Buddhism a part of the Hindu mainstream. Interestingly, however, Gautama Buddha is called an incarnation of a Hindu god and, at the same time, he has been declared heresy.

It goes to the credit of Hinduism that it has tried to theoretically justify the absorption of Buddhism unto itself even though it stood theologically in opposition to Hinduism. At the same time it never hesitated to use even the weapon of force and persecution against the latter, whenever it happened to enjoy patronage of the political authority in India; the example of the Huna king Mihirakula is part of history and he is known for destroying the Buddhist monasteries and killing the monks. The role Hinduism played in the extinction of Buddhism from the land of its origin might give it an exclusivistic character, but this was surely not the sole reason behind the disappearance of Buddhism. There were some other factors as well which contributed to the decline of Buddhism in India, and we shall here refer to them only briefly.

It is said that during the reign of Emperor Ashoka Vedic Brahmanism was the religion of a small minority in the Indian subcontinent, though gradually it was gaining strength.[11] No doubt, Buddhism happened to get established in several parts of Ashoka's empire as a result of the patronage provided by him, but his "general policy was not an active proselytizing in favour of Buddhism at the expense of Brahmanism. It was open to acceptance or rejection by all or any."[12] Ashoka is said to have repeatedly stated that respect is to be shown to both Brahmans and *sramanas*. However, the more extensive spread and enhancement of Buddhism came from its new patrons in the mercantile community in the post-Mauryan period. The Buddhist *sangha* soon became affluent, with monasteries having large endowments, employing slaves and hired labourers to work the land and labour on other enterprises. These monasteries were built adjoining a town or on a route frequented by merchants and caravans or pilgrims, or–very occasionally–on some beautiful and secluded location far removed from busy cities. Secluded monasteries were sufficiently well endowed to enable the monks

to live in reasonable comfort. However, in this way, the *sangha* moved away from the common people, thus diminishing its strength as an ideology endorsing social ethics, a development one suspects the Buddha would have resisted.

The Muslim invasions and the religious policy of intolerance they followed after becoming conquerors and rulers of the land were also a major factor in the disappearance of Buddhism from the Indian soil. These invaders/rulers destroyed various flourishing Buddhist monasteries and universities especially in Sind and Bengal and put many monks to sword. But Buddhism also died out though much more slowly in regions which were not touched by the Muslim invasions or their policies, as in Nepal and south of India. Hence, we need to seek the cause of this decline and disappearance of Buddhism as much within it as without it.[14] Perhaps, th establisment of monasteries away from villages and towns and providing them with good endowments was greatly responsible in bringing about laxity among the monks. This is somewhat like the situation Sikhism faced when certain Skikh chiefs endowed their holy shrines with huge jagirs leading to moral laxity and corruption among the Udasi Mahants or custodians of these shrines during the 19th and early 20th century.

Islam is a Semitic religion and came to India through traders, invaders and Sufi missionaries. It had very little common with Hinduism and in a way stood doctrinally opposite to it. Hinduism has a large pantheon of gods, and none of them is indispensable. However, in Islam, such has been "the eminence and the indispensability of Muhammad to believing Islam that when death removed his hand from the helm of its destinies and the Caliphs took over the political leadership his personality continued to dominate....His *Sirah* or life-story, we might say, took over the script where the Quran left off, but always in subservience and conformity to it."[15] If Islam was monotheistic in belief, Hinduism believed in polytheism. Hindus performed idolatry whereas the Muslims were strictly iconoclasts. The manifest material world

has been *mayā* to the Hindus, whereas the Muslims acknowledged it as real. The Hindu social structure was hierarchically divided into different *varnas* and observed untouchability, whereas the Muslim social order was marked by equality of humankind. Thus, Hinduism and Islam stood in opposition to each other. The earlier history of Hinduism showed a tendency to absorb into itself any new tradition but felt helpless in the case of Islam. The Muslims believed in the myth of religious superiority and considered their religion as the final revelation and norm for all other religions. In such a situation, conflict between the two was natural, and in this conflict Hindus happened to be at the receiving end.

When the Muslims began invading India from the north-west around the tenth century, they came with the sole purpose of looting and molesting the *kafirs*. They took away the wealth and women and destroyed the Hindu places of worship. Hindus at that time happened to be a disorganized lot, generally given to asceticism. They preferred to pray to various gods seeking their help. They expected the gods to act on their behalf against the Muslim invaders rather than taking up weapons themselves. Thus, the indigenous people not only suffered the loss of life but also of honour and dignity. As the Muslim invaders began conquering territory and later became rulers of the land, the position of the Hindus became like that of a patient etherized on table. They passively suffered all the humiliations heaped upon them, including conversion through inducement and force. They were made to pay a special tax (*jizia*) to survive in an Islamic state. Those who happened to be in the employment of the rulers tried to emulate their Muslim masters when outside, though they performed their Hindu worship and rituals once inside their home. The Sikh scripture refers to this hypocritical behaviour of the Hindus and condemns it.

In more recent times, the Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayanand (1824–83), arose as a reform movement within Hinduism.

It has perhaps been an example of the most vocal exclusivistic Hinduism. On the one hand, Dayanand was a religious reformer wanting to remove all non-Vedic corrupt influences from Hinduism and Hindu way of life. On the other hand, he adopted an aggressive and militant approach towards other groups within Hinduism as well as towards other religions. His remarks about the latter have been especially sarcastic and damning. He was particularly against Islam which, he felt, needed "to be utterly discarded." In one of his writings, he says about Islam:

> Such a book [Quran], such a prophet and such a religion do nothing but harm. The world would be better off without them. Wise men would do well to discard a religion so absurd and accept the Vedic faith which is absolutely free from error.[17]

Of course, Dayanand made such derogatory remarks about other religions and their prophets also. In the case of Sikhism, he wanted to rectify some of his comments expressed in the earlier edition of this book, but his death on 10 October 1883 intervened.[18] After the second edition of the *Satyarth Prakash* which perhaps came out after the author's demise, some over-zealous young men in the Arya Samaj adopted an increasingly hostile attitude towards other religions. The decline of the Mughal rule in early eighteenth century had also resulted in the spurt of Hindu nationalism: the "Maratha concept of '*Hindu-pad padshahi*' – the imperial status of Hindus – aptly summed up the pan-Hindu aspirations."[19] The same hardliners are still harping on the theme of 'one-nation, one-religion, one-language' theory. This is partly responsible for the bitterness between the two communities.

The Hindu perception of Sikhism ever since its origin has been suggestive of the view that Sikhism is just another sect within Hinduism, Sikh thought is a re-statement of Hindu doctrines in simple understandable terms and that Guru Nanak was a Hindu reformer.[20] The reason behind this might have been the Hindu tendency to lay its claim on any religious system originating in

India as having emanated from the ancient concept of *dharma* as explained in the Hindu epics.[21] They saw in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus reiteration of the lofty ideals which the sages of ancient India had preached and also found the vocabulary/terminology used by the Gurus in their scriptural hymns as overwhelmingly Hindu. Interestingly, Hindus saw in Guru Tegh Bahadur the protector of their faith but apprehended the creation of Khalsa as it challenged the Brahmin's elitist status in society. They failed to see that Guru Gobind Singh was as much against the status quo policy of the Brahmins (Hindus) as he was against the repression of the Mughal government of the day.

Thus, Hinduism is placed in a similar love-hate relationship with Sikhism from the very beginning. By the end of the eighteenth century, Sikhs were able to stop the Afghan invasions from the north-west and thus put an end to the persecution they had been suffering from for more than half a century. They were able to acquire political power by the last decades of the eighteenth century and their sway ran almost up to Delhi in the south and Kabul in the north-west. However, a long period first of their struggle for survival and then for political consolidation led to laxity in matters religious. A period of decline in Sikhism followed. The Sikhs got lax in their spiritual and social values, in their symbols and ceremonies in favour of orthodox Hindu practices. The absorbing power of Hinduism can be seen at its best at that time.

There has been no instance of any serious bitterness in Hindu-Sikh relations up to the middle of the nineteenth century. Even during the 1857 uprising, the relations between the two communities were rather amiable. When the Namdharis, a sect within Sikhism, "in their overflowing zeal and fanatical frenzy pulled down a number of Hindu tombs and went about shouting – *marhi masani dhai ke kar dio madana*, meaning 'pull down the mausoleums and crematories and level them with the earth–..., this could have easily provided an opportunity for anyone to create

hostilities between the Hindus and Sikhs.[12] The origins of the Hindu-Sikh tension can easily be traced to Swami Dayanand who used derogatory remarks for the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh scripture. The Arya Samaj, a renaissance movement among the Hindus, was in its initial phase supported by the Sikhs also. Soon, however, it became the most vocal organ of Hinduism to declare that Sikhism is only reformed Hinduism, and that Sikhs are just turbaned Hindus, apart from denigrating the Sikh Gurus and their scripture. Bhai Jagat Singh, a Sikh member of the Arya Samaj, contended that Sikhism was merely an earlier version of the Arya Samaj. Lala Thakar Das and Bawa Narain Singh supported his position in their booklet *Sikh Hindu Hain* [Sikhs are Hindus] published in 1899. A polemic ensued and Bhai Kahn Singh of Nabha replied to it the same year in the form of another book *Ham Hindu Nahin* [We are not Hindus] which "is a clear-cut declaration of Sikh identity registered by a Sikh scholar and intellectual towards the close of the nineteenth century."[13] In fact, Swami Dayanand and his utterances marked the beginning of tension in inter-community relations. The turn of the twentieth century and the opening decades witnessed a lot of polemic among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. It will not be wrong to say that *Satyarth Prakash* caused the birth of the Muslim League and is directly responsible for the partition of the country and what happened at that time. A study of the polemic literature of the period shows how all the dominant religious communities in Punjab became apprehensive of the designs of one another.

In the twentieth century when India got independence, it became a Hindu majority democracy. The Congress party which came to power had some important Arya Samajist elements among its ranks. These elements initially refused to accept Sikhism as an independent entity and Sikhs as equal partners in the freedom of the nation. This made Sikhs apprehensive of the Congress' intentions even though some of these elements, led by Shyama

Prasad Mukherji left Congress to set up a new political outfit, Jan Sangh, with Hindutva as its agenda. This was the first attempt to turn the sporadic exclusivistic noises into a sort of movement. The Hindu Parishad, the RSS, the Bajrang Dal and such other outfits are working on the Hindutva agenda for the Bharatiya Janta Party, the new *avatar* of the earlier Jan Sangh. Their aim has been to transform pluralist India into a one-nation, one-religion, one-language country. This has already created a lot of misunderstanding, though it has so far failed to create bad blood between Hindus and Sikhs. We only partly agree with the known historian when he says that the Hindu-Sikh tension is in fact the Arya Samaj-Sikh tension,[24] since the Hindu perception of the Sikh faith has ever remained tainted.

No doubt, Guru Nanak (1468-1539), the founder of the Sikh faith, was born in a Hindu family and thus the genealogy of all the Gurus is sure to go back to one or the other Hindu family. Was Jesus of Nazareth not born in a Jew family? But an affirmative answer to this question will not imply that his followers are not Christians but Jews. Similar is the case with Prophet Muhammad of Islam. In fact, this is true in the case of each founder of a new faith, since no religion or theology has been born in a vacuum. Second, no doubt, Sikhism is also obliged to older theologies, both Indian and Semitic. In fact, each new religion accepts something from the older faiths and traditions and thus appears to be close to them, but at the same time it rejects a lot and introduces a lot afresh. This is what marks its distinct individuality and precipitates a new *gestalt*. In the case of Sikhism also, the question of indebtedness loses all relevance when we find that it has not been a blind acceptance of the older theologies in full or in part, but a critical reflection upon them coupled with the genius of its ten spiritual preceptors, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. It comes out obviously that Sikhism shares certain features with other religions then prevalent in India, but at the same time it

significantly differs from them in many respects. The Gurus envisioned it to have a separate and distinct identity of its own. All attempts to find similarities between Sikhism and Hinduism so as to prove it a branch of Hinduism have come to naught. Any attempt to deny Sikhism an independent and distinct entity and to prove it a part of any other religion is neither correct nor in tune with the modern-day pluralistic thinking. In the early twentieth century, the Hindu renaissance felt tempted to present Sikhism as a Hindu sect and a large number of Sikh martyrs and the Sikh Gurus as Hindu heroes. The need of the day is for the such Hindu thinkers and leaders to reassess their extant perceptions of Sikhism to enable to stand the test of scientific study.

As elsewhere in the world, India is also a pluralistic nation and we have to live with this social reality. Any ideology of religious intolerance is retrograde and is bound to fail despite all overt and covert assistance provided to it by some vested interests from time to time. The need is to relish the unity of India behind the vast diversity of religions and languages, rather than nurturing the dream of turning India into a uni-religious, uni-language and uni-cultural state. The latter attempt under any euphemism is not only doomed to failure but is also sure to damage the Indian social fabric. If we want to see our country and the world at large free from violence, "we have to learn to see others as our brothers and sisters. We need to discover how to affirm our own identity–be it as individuals or as a community–without threatening the identity of others."[25]

III

Christianity and Islam, both religions of Semitic origin, had already reached India by the time Sikhism originated. Although Islam originated later than Christianity yet the former reached India before Christianity. It was during the first half of the seventh century that Islam made its first contact with India: it was around this time that some Muslim Arabs reached the southern peninsula

as traders travelling through sea.[26] If Muslims came earlier to the south of India as traders, they came later from the north-west of the country as invaders. Initially, their object was only to molest and loot the country. They came in hordes one after the other, looted whatever they could lay their hands on and went back. This was also mixed with the zeal to chastise the 'infidels' of India, by killing them en mass, defiling and destroying their places of worship and carrying away their women and children. Gradually, however, they began to conquer territory and finally settled down as rulers of the land.

We learn that Islam existed in India from the seventh century CE, but there seems no clear evidence of any Islamic influence on Hinduism until after the Muslim conquest. It was in 711-12 that Muslims captured and established rule over Deval, a port near modern-day Karachi, and Aror, north of Hyderabad.[27] However, it was not until the ninth and the tenth centuries that the full Muslim invasion was launched. Mahmud of Ghazni opened the mountain route to raid India, and beginning with his first invasion in 998, he led seventeen invading expeditions against India. But it took about another century and a half for the Muslim rule to be established in almost the whole of north India. Sufis soon followed to take up residence in court and the encounter with Hinduism began in all earnestness. Although Sufis did make a small dent in the countryside where mixed audiences gathered around them, on the whole the society seems to have remained dominated by a pattern of cultural and religious segregation. Both the Hindus and Muslims preferred to live in isolation of each other.

Although Islam was also, like Christianity, a missionary religion but it tried entirely different ways and means to convert the locals to their faith. If the Christian missionaries did so as 'white man's burden' to civilize the pagans, the Muslim rulers made blatant use of force to convert the '*kafirs*': the Sufi saints were an exception to use their persuasive power and expression

of love to bring people to the Islamic fold. In fact, the Sufi saints through the example of personal piety made a deep impact on the common man who felt attracted to them. However, both Islam and Christianity used the myth of religious superiority for their expansionist designs. Such an exclusivistic attitude could only lead to mistrust and bitterness between different faith communities. In fact, the Islamic approach to convert people was twofold: one, the rulers tried to convert with force and by various kinds of allurements. These conversions were sporadic to begin with, but gradually such conversions became many and more often. Then arose resistance against this. Sikh history stands witness to the struggle the Gurus launched against this exclusivistic religious policy of the contemporary Muslim rulers. The Gurus were votaries of religious freedom and they struggled and suffered to realize it. The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur needs to be studied in this context. Sikhism is theologically against all formalism and symbols unless they do not reflect certain inner values which they externalize. Thus, Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom should not be taken in support of *tilak* and *janeu*, two external symbols of Hindus, which were then under threat. It was for the freedom of conscience so that each one should be able to practice the faith of one's choice. The Guru might have done the same for the Muslims had the situation been the other way round.

There were attempts by the Muslim ruling authority to convert the Sikhs as well. In the *Tuzk*, the life account of Emperor Jahangir, the Emperor takes note of the popularity of Guru Arjan among Hindus as well as Muslims. Since he and his religious advisers held their religion, Islam, to be superior to all other religions, he could not accept the fact that Muslims should accept the spiritual greatness of a non-Muslim holy man. That was a major reason why he asked the Guru to either accept Islam or face death. There have been several other examples of futile persuasion of the Sikhs such as the younger sons of Guru Gobind

Singh, persons arrested along with Guru Tegh Bahadur, Banda Singh Bahadur and his companions, and so on. In all these cases the option given was either death or conversion to Islam. The temptations provided by the ruling class to the non-Muslim populace, especially the dominant Hindu community, were of two kinds. The Hindu social order was hierarchically divided into four caste groups, apart from another sizeable group of outcastes. These outcastes and other lower castes were socially neglected and in some cases ostracized too. As per the Hindu *varnā ashram dharma*, these were supposed to be in the service of the people of higher castes. Exogamous marriages between these low caste people and others were not permitted. In the religious sphere also, they were prejudiced against. They could neither study nor teach the scriptures. So much so they could not even listen to them being recited by someone for somebody else's benefit. Entry into religious shrines was taboo. They were tempted to join Islam which did not believe in any caste system and wherein anyone irrespective of his social class or rank could enter a mosque, pray there and be saved by Allah. This vast chunk of Hindu population became an easy target, and quite a good number of them also converted to this new faith.

Around this time, the so-called upper caste people who worked at various positions of importance during the Mughal rule also came under Islamic influence, though they did not formally convert to Islam. To keep themselves in the good books of their Muslim employers and to keep their cushy jobs safe, these people lived a dual life. Outside in society they would wear and behave as the Muslims did, but inside the four walls of their home, they performed their Hindu religious rituals and ceremonies. Guru Nanak in one of his compositions chides such hypocrite people, warning them that such dual dealing will lead them to nowhere:

Thou charge tax for the cow and the Brahman,
The cow-dung will not save thee;

Thou wear a loin-cloth, put a frontal mark and carry rosary,
But thou eat the Muslims' provisions;
Thou perform [Hindu] worship within,
But read the Quran and follow Muslim way of life without;
Give up the hypocrisy,
Only Divine Name can take you across the world-ocean.[25]

The role in the conversion of non-Muslims into the Islamic fold was performed by the Sufis with equal success vis-à-vis the Muslim rulers, the only difference being that the Sufis used love and the example of their personal piety whereas the Muslim rulers used the might of sword. The Sufis were holy men who preached love for God and for mankind. They preached in indigenous language and idiom the transient nature of world, loving devotion for God who was Friend and Beloved, simple and austere living, humility, and so on. They practised what they professed and therefore they attracted a large following across the religious boundaries. They along with some holy men from the Hindu Bhakti tradition initiated a trend which exhorted people to look beyond sectarian considerations. Many miraculous events were also added to the names of some Sufi saints who did hard penance. All this attracted many non-Muslims especially from the countryside to these Sufis and their faith.

It was for the first time in the history of Hinduism that it confronted in Islam a religion which it could neither absorb nor subordinate. It was not possible to take it under the broader Hindu umbrella, nor was it possible to dominate it since power was in the hands of Muslims. Islam was a missionary religion and the *qazis* and *mulla'hs* wanted to extend the Islamic sway on the hearts and minds of all Indian people along side its political sway over the country. Some of them acted as theocratic advisors of the rulers, advising them to forcibly convert the Hindus and others into Islam. At the same time, however, the Sufis preached love and sought conversion through their example of piety and

persuasion. Consequently, many Hindus, especially from the lower caste-groups went over to the Islamic fold.

The last about couple of decades of the nineteenth were marked by a period of intense dynamism, of ideological and religious conflict amidst an atmosphere of increasing polemic. This period saw the most intense polemic between various communities in the Punjab. Very bitter debates went on within each community and between different communities. The Arya Samaj had a biting polemic with the Muslims, orthodox Hindus and the Sikhs. Such debates were for a while almost a regular feature outside the Mochi Gate at Lahore. The Sikhs faced this onslaught from Ahmadiyas also who contended that Guru Nanak was a Muslim. This polemic has been kept alive by certain members of the Ahmadiaya sect even today, and they refuse to give up this refrain.[29] As for Hinduism, the contention of Dayanand that Sikhism is not a distinct religion, rather is a sect within Hinduism has been kept alive by various groups given to this Arya Samajist ideology.

IV

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, Punjab was annexed by the British: the cis-Satluj Sikh states had already accepted the British suzerainty. This was the time when many Christian missionaries from the West were active in the region. They enjoyed the implicit patronage of the political authority and made conversions from different religious communities-Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. There was a kind of religious competitiveness going on between Hindus and Sikhs who happened to be minority communities in the Punjab, concerning their sense of identity. They felt afraid to lose to both Islam and Christianity whereas they along with Muslims were apprehensive of the Christian missionary activities. These missionaries had been converting many persons, especially the down-trodden rustics, from different faith-communities, thus leading to a kind of tension in society.

In fact, invading hordes and nomadic tribes from the central Asia and regions in the west had begun to come over to India much earlier. Many of them were imperceptibly sucked into the Hindu social order. The Greeks came even before the beginning of the Christian era: Alexander the great entered the Indian provinces in 327 BC after having marched across the empire of Darius. The Greek campaign in the north-west of India lasted for about two years and it took him across the five rivers of the Punjab. The Indians pejoratively used the term Yavana for the Greeks. Later this term became a generic for people coming from the west and was used until quite recently for people coming from the West. Some later Brahmanical text were bitterly uncomplimentary and hateful about the Yavanas. The reason might be a lingering memory of either Alexander's hostility to the Brahmanas during his campaign or the patronage provided by the later Yavana rulers to the sects that did not conform to Brahmanism. Buddhist texts refer to the division of Yavana society into the masters and slaves as an alternative to the caste stratification.[30] The Portuguese, French, Dutch, Danish and the British came to India between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut in 1492 to seek 'Christians and spices'.[31] The Portuguese, who conquered Goa in 1510, acquired a reputation for cruelty and perfidy: "in religion they were intolerant to the extent of allowing no Hindu temple in Goa.[32] They were soon followed by the French, Dutch and the English. The English who later on conquered almost the entire Indian sub-continent and ruled it for more than a century came, in the beginning, as traders and missionaries, but ultimately settled as rulers of the land.

Interestingly, Christianity came to southern parts of India much earlier than in the north where originated the Sikh faith. We find no reference to Christ or Christianity or Judaism in the Sikh scriptural literature. Of course, the Christian missionaries were attracted to the Sikhs and their faith from the earliest times but

they were able to establish their missions in Punjab only in the early 19th century: historically, it was around the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh that the Sikhs and Sikhism encountered Christian missionaries from the West. They immediately began publishing their literature in Punjabi, the language of the region, and providing humanitarian assistance to the poor and the needy. A Punjabi version of the Bible was published by William Carey in 1819 and of the New Testament by Rev. John Newton of the Ludhiana Mission in 1868.

Rev. John C. Lowrie, the first American Christian missionary (of the Presbyterian Church), traveled to India in 1834 and set up a mission at Ludhiana, the north-western British outpost bordering close to the kingdom of Ranjit Singh. In his travelogue, Lowrie gives several reasons for setting up this mission, especially "the Sikh people to whom our attention was at first specially directed."[33] The mission ran an English school and a printing press. Maharaja Ranjit Singh also wanted to have an English school set up in his capital for the children of his family and other promising young men. He invited Lowrie to Lahore especially for this purpose, but "the missionary principle of teaching the Gospel in connection with literature and science was unacceptable to the Maharaja.[34] It seems the Maharaja was well aware of the Christian missions and their activities in and around Punjab.

To begin with, the objective of these Christian missionaries and travelers who happened to visit this part of India was primarily religious, to prepare ground to evangelize and proselytize. These missionaries learnt indigenous languages and culture, and translated their scriptural and other literature in various languages of the region. This helped them in a big way to reach the masses. They started several schools where teaching of gospel was compulsory along side the secular education provided there. They undertook many philanthropic ventures especially among the tribals and the people who were considered low-caste or untouchables in the

Hindu social order. For example, the United Presbyterian Mission in Sialkot first converted in 1855 a person from the sweeper class in Marali village, but in the eleventh year of his conversion more than five hundred persons from the region were received in the Church. By 1900, more than half of these lowly people in Sialkot district had been converted and by 1915 all but a few hundred members of the caste professed the Christian faith.[35]

This trend of luring the tribals and other low-caste/untouchable people in the Christian fold through various philanthropic activities/ ventures still continues. These missionaries are more active among the regions where poverty prevails, where fruits of development through science and technology have failed to reach. Since most of such people come from the Hindu background, this has in the recent past created a lot of bitterness between the Hindu leaders and Christian missionaries. Hinduism has not been able to wipe off caste hierarchy and we still find temples with sign-boards at their entry points banning the entry of low-caste people as well as of other non-Hindus. This happens in spite of the fact that the Indian constitution specifically bans untouchability and any discrimination against any one on the basis of his caste or creed is proclaimed unlawful.

The Sikh-Christian encounter remained peripheral until the British developed political interests in the Punjab and then annexed it in 1849. Thus, it was around the time of annexation (both before and after that) that the Britishers' interest in Sikh religion intensified. Several officers and others connected with the East India Company/British government in India took upon themselves to study Sikh religion and people. The Christian interest in Sikhs and Sikhism is evident from valedictory instructions given to the first batch of missionaries of the Church of England appointed to the Punjab in 1852. These instructions said: "Though the Brahaman religion still sways the minds of a large proportion of the population of the Punjab, and the Mohammedan of another, the dominant

religion and power for the last century has been the Sikh religion, a species of pure theism, formed in the first instance by a dissenting sect from Hinduism. A few hopeful instances lead us to believe that the Sikhs may prove more accessible to scriptural truths than the Hindus and the Muhammedans."[36] The annual report, for year 1853, of the Ludhiana Christian Mission testifies to the deep interest these missionaries had in spreading the gospel among people of Punjab, especially the Sikhs. In the Nirankari movement, they saw "a state of mind favourable to the reception of Truth....[and they wanted] to give it proper direction."[37]

The first Sikh to have become Christian is recorded to be one Daud Singh who was baptized at Kanpur by Rev. W.H. Perkins. A Sikh *granthi* (scripture-reader) of Sultanwind (Amritsar) and Rulia Ram, a Hindu Khatri of Amritsar, also embraced Christianity. The United Presbyterian Mission met with great success in the Sialkot region. The conversion of Maharaja Duleep Singh was hailed as "the first instance of the ascesion of an Indian prince to the communion of the Church." Harnam Singh, the heir-apparent of Kapurthala state, had earlier embraced Christianity. As the Christian missions were often associated with colonial political order, the missionary aims of conversion and colonial aims of advancing European domination and civilization were often interwoven into a single project. This attitude of colonialism, superiority, my way or no way and Christian uniqueness continued. Such an exclusivist does not see the perspective of the other as possibly an alternative view of God's over-abundant mystery. This attitude was obviously visible in the British rule over Indian Empire during the 19th century when Rev. John C. Lowrie visited Punjab. He was especially impressed with the interfaith harmony, especially "the way Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus intermingled everywhere and to see the mosques and temples of these sects... standing in the same streets".

These Christian missionaries presented the ideal of Christianity to this local audience, but in return they reported the practical Hinduism back home. They did humanitarian deeds by giving the needy the basic necessities of life. Although some Britishers had been asking for "imperial justice" and 'responsibility for the welfare of the subject peoples' yet Christian missions did not condemn British wars against the colonized people. The Christian expansion in Asia and other parts of the world took place along side the Western imperial expansion. It will not be wrong to say that "in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the conviction of the decisive superiority of Christianity infused the imperial expansion of the West with a powerful moral impetus and an effective religious validation without which the enterprise might well not have been psychologically viable." The European colonization carved out by the aggressive might of their military technology covered almost a quarter of the surface of the globe. In this expansion of the imperial rule, sometimes trade followed the flag and some other times flag was planted to protect an already established trade, the basic motive being acquisitiveness and aggrandizement. It was the time when the Europeans took it as the 'white man's burden' to rule over black and brown populations with a view to civilize them. A natural corollary of this attitude was that they took their subjects inferior, their cultures barbarous and their religions idolatrous superstitions. An effort was , thus, being made to provide a moral validation to this imperial enterprise by calling it 'a great civilizing and uplifting mission, one of whose tasks was to draw the unfortunate heathens up into the higher, indeed highest, religion of Christianity.

The white man's understanding of the Sikh faith and community can be well gauged from the British administrative report (1849-51) which says:

> The Sikh faith and ecclesiastical policy is rapidly going where Sikh political ascendancy has already gone. These men joined

in thousands and they now desert in equal numbers. The sacred tank of Amritsar is less thronged than formerly and the attendance at annual festivals is diminishing yearly. Initiatory ceremony for adult persons is now rarely performed. Gurmukhi is rapidly falling into desuetude. The Punjabi as a spoken language is also losing its currency and degenerating into a merely provincial and rustic dialect.

It was an assumption that all non-Christian religions were of lower grade and that the lower levels of religious activity would atrophy in the near future. This turned out to be fallacious information and a complete misreading and misjudging of the situation, especially as we see today Sikhism and Sikhs spread all over the world and many Sikhs not only flourishing in Western countries and holding high positions but also many Churches getting converted into *gurdwaras*.

In brief, we can say that the Westerners' interest in Sikhism is only a little more than two centuries old. Initially, a few Western scholars and missionaries felt attracted towards Sikh religion purely for religious considerations. However, in the first half of the 19th century seeking information about Sikh religion and community became a political necessity with them. In the 20th century, however, the Western interest in Sikhism has become purely academic and scholarly. With the world shrinking into a small global family, Sikhs have spread to almost all countries and continents of the world, and interest in this distinct religious entity is genuine and only natural among the Westerners.

In the first category of literature comes first of all a letter[38] by Father Jerome Xavier s.j., a Spaniard by birth and upbringing, which contains very useful information about the martyrdom of Guru Arjan. Written on 25 September 1606 from Lahore, the letter was addressed to the Jesuit Provincial Superior of Goa. It is a private letter which gives news of the life of a few Christians

living in Lahore and Agra, some contemporary political events (including Emperor Akbar's death, revolt by Khusrau, Xavier's meeting with Emperor Jahangir, etc.) and the martyrdom of Guru Arjan. There is another letter (10 March 1716) by John Surman and Edward Stephenson which gives an eye-witness account of the execution of Banda Singh Bahadur and his companions. John Surman who led the British Embassy to the Mughal court admires the steadfastness and forbearance of the Sikhs who were being executed a hundred a day. He tells that they underwent their fate with patience and none of them agreed to give up his faith.[39] These two letters, having been written by a neutral and non-participant party, are of great historical value and the evidence offered by them helps us to understand the Sikh tradition of martyrdom, a major phenomenon of 18th century Sikhism. The works of James Brown, Crawford, *et al.* can be included in this category.

With the Sikhs acquiring political power in the Punjab, a study of the Sikh religion and community became a political necessity with the British. The works in this category include John Malcolm's *Sketch of the Sikhs* (1810); W.G. Osborne's *The Court and Camp of Runjeet Sing*; McGregor's *The History of the Sikhs* (1810); H.T. Princep's *Origin of the Sikh Power in the Punjab and the Political Life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh with an Account of the Religion, Laws and Customs of the Sikhs* (1834) Henry Steinbach's *The Punjab* (1845); and G. Carmichael Smyth's *A History of the Reigning Family of Lahore* (1847). Joseph Davey Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* (1849) is different from his predecessors in the field not only in the use of source material but also in some of his assumptions. For example, he places Guru Nanak in the context of the Bhakti movement but not to imply similarities so much as to underline the distinction. In fact, it was perhaps for the first time that a Westerner scholar of Sikhism had relied on a personal understanding of the Sikh sacred and other literature. Unlike some modern-day historians who attach more

importance to accidents of position or the achievement of a contemporary genius than 'race and religion', Cunningham took up the project with two obvious objects in mind-to give Sikhism its place in the general history of humanity' and 'to give some account of the connections of the English with the Sikhs'. The end-product has been clearly a fulfillment of both the objectives.

After the annexation of the Punjab in 1849 by the British, the Sikhs were no more a political power to contend with. However, this did not lessen the Westerners' interest in Sikh religion though this interest was more academic know. The British Government in the Punjab resolved in 1859 to get the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, and the *Dasam Granth* translated into English, but what Ernest Trumpp produced has been outrightly rejected as derogatory to Sikhism. The Sikh loss of power and their dwindling numbers made some Western scholars proclaim a bleak future for the Sikhs and Sikhism. John Oman Campbell, who made two visits to the Golden Temple in the late 19th century, concluded that "Sikhism as a distinct religion possesses little vitality and by a generation or two will be reunited to Hinduism from where it sprang. Brahmans I daresay, willingly recognize Nanak and Gobind Singh as incarnations of some god or other; while the Sikhs who already bow down to the old divinities of India, would not in all likelihood object to the formal admission of their Gurus and their Book into the Hindu Pantheon." Most of the works on Sikhism by Western authors in the twentieth century seem to be inspired primarily by pure academic interest.

Thus, we find that there has been a very important shift in the Christian attitude towards Indian religions including the Sikh faith. To begin with, they were colonial rulers considering all native subjects, of whatever religious denomination, as inferior to them. All native faiths were also taken as invalid. There was a kind of nexus between the political and ecclesiastical leadership, and the latter felt encouraged to spread the Gospel and proffer

various kinds of inducements to convert others to Christianity. However, the easy availability of authentic literature about religions, increased intermingling of people of different faith-communities, end of the colonial era, more efficient means of transportation and communication, etc. have resulted in this change of attitude. Notwithstanding the few ideological and interpretational differences with some Western writers of Sikhism, the Christian attitude toward Sikhism is generally of acceptance and tolerance.

VI

It is very easy to appreciate the ideal of one's own faith and depreciate the practical side of the faith of the other. There is always a lot of difference between the ideal and practice of any given faith. We have seen in the preceding pages that most of the faith-communities have tended to consider their respecstive faith as the sole way to God/Truth- realization and as the highest and most significantly developed world of religious life. On the other hand, they have presented other religions as mere amalgam of superstititons and rituals, magic and witchcraft. Of course, today if one says that his religion or culture is superior, we take it as a grandiose of self-flattery, but the missionary faiths used to-and some still continue to-say this quite blatantly. Either they did not know or did not want to know that one must crawl into the cultural skin of a religion before making any such judgement. Truth is one but it has many cultural expressions. Therefore, it is virtually impossible to judge one religion as better or worse than the other. Unfortunately, there was none back home to present these fundamental facts to these people from Semitic religions. The Christian West has especially assumed glibly that in its relations with Afro-Asia, all it has to do is to give and teach. They were (and in some regions, they still are) under the mistaken notion that these people need to be shown the light of Christianity. They refuse to see men, women and children of other faith as genuine

persons, with genuine faith, those who see the universe but see it in different ways.

Despite the different views of philosophers and theologians belonging to different religious traditions of the world, we still feel that no prophet, no founder of any faith was ever exclusivist in his approach toward mankind. What he said and did was for the welfare of the entire mankind. It goes to the credit or discredit of the adherents of these prophets and founders that they, in their bid to prove their tradition better and higher than others, created such myths and boundaries. The Hindu Vedas say that 'God is one but sages [holy men, theologians] call It by many names.' They teach of one divine reality that phenomenalizes in varied different forms. Thus, Hinduism sees different sects within itself and other religions as different manifestations of the one divine reality. Since all manifestations lead back to the same source, there should be no conflict among traditions. Islam whose encounter with other religions goes back to the days of Prophet Mohammad himself has throughout its history maintained that all religions are deviations from the one primordial religion, but they seem to err in believing Islam to be the final and full revelation. It considered other religions at fault "because they had lost or corrupted the original revelation or had fallen into doctrinal error[40] which implicitly meant nothing wrong with the ideal of other religions but with the practice of other religions. Similarly in Christianity, the historical Jesus did not himself teach that he was the son of God, the second person of a divine trinity.

Rejecting claim of any religion to its uniqueness and being the only full and final revelation of truth, we are left with the problematic whether the mystical experience at the heart of each religious tradition was essentially the same, as says Ramakrishna. According to this Hindu reformer, differences are caused by theological and cultural conditioning and thus are inessential: instead of competing, different religions should co-operate with

one another. However, the second opinion is that each religion provides a different perspective on truth and is thus apparently different from the others. It is only after the understanding and knowledge of all the different perspectives that we can have a viable knowledge of the complete or near-complete truth since no single perspective in itself can provide a glimpse of the whole, complete truth.

History of religions is on the whole marked by mutual hostility and rivalry because each religion and sometimes each group within a religion claims monopoly over truth. None is willing to listen to or accept the disagreement. Those who disagree are considered to be wrong and thus they should either be refuted or physically repressed, persecuted or liquidated. Such religious hostilities and rivalries have in the past enflamed and they still enflame bitterness and conflict in our societal relations. Unfortunately, adherents of each religion in their enthusiasm to overpower or monopolize forgets that such hostilities betray the true spirit and teachings of their faith. One should stop calling the practiced religion of the other inferior to the ideal of one's own, rather one should try to see how far his own religion falls short of its own ideals and precepts and professions.

In the Indian context, we find the growth of self-consciousness in each faith community about its ethno-cultural, ethno-religious and ethno-political identity. Instead of endeavouring to arrive at a sort of unitive pluralism while acknowledging the beauty of diversity, the majority-communities aim at homogenizing. The minorities see in it an attempt at absorption. This makes them more conscious of their identity and when they find themselves incapable to cope with the present, they fall back on real or imagined religio-historical past and they see it inversely as a futuristic projection. Such a virulence of nationalism (this is my country, right or wrong) and fundamentalism (this is my religion,

one and the only true path leading to God) is not good for humankind as a whole.

We must realize that the Absolute One is manifest in all of history, but no historical manifestation of the Absolute One can be absolute. Truth is always many-sided and each religion shows only its one side. If we confine our study and understanding only to one particular religion, our knowledge of Truth will be fragmentary. The clear effulgence of Light is broken down by multiple religions into a multi-coloured spectrum of human religious expressions. We may not be able to describe the infinite and inexpressible Absolute, but we can study how different people in different languages and cultures experienced God and how their scriptures and other holy books have interpreted that experience. We can study people's religious practices and the effect of a particular religion on the adherents' ethical and social behaviour. This implies that the Real cannot be described as It is in itself, but only as It is thought and experienced in human terms. The Quranic statement that 'the origin of the divine light in the world is neither eastern nor western [in other words, revelation is not region-specific] but the metaphors with which Divine revelation is expressed in a mundane language are necessarily one' is quite relevant. This explains why God is conceived and expressed variously.

Sikhism, the youngest of the major religions of the world, happens to be the latest, but not the highest or the last revelation of God among God's continual self-revelation at different points of time in history. Neither the Sikh tradition nor the Sikh scripture ever claims monopoly over truth. It was born in Indian culture and the founder of the Sikh faith was born in a Hindu family, but Sikhism never claimed to supersede or replace Hinduism. On the other hand, it exhorts each human being to be true to one's faith. It does not reject the authority of Hindu scriptures, and for that matter any other religious scriptures. The Sikh preference is for

multi-scriptural outlook as against the mono-scriptural: though it does point out the limitations of earlier scriptures yet it emphatically states - "not to call the Vedas [scriptures of Hindus] or the Qateb [Semitic scriptures] false because false is the man who does not reflect on them."[41]

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2. Swami Lokeswarananda, "Religious Pluralism: A Hindu Point of View" in K.P. Aleaz, Ed. *Dialogue in India: Multi-Religious Perspective and Practice*, Bishop's College, Calcutta, 1991, p. 12
3. W.C. Smith, *Patterns of Faith Around the World*, 111-12
4. Monier Monier-Williams, *Hinduism*, 74
5. Harold Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions*, 63
6. T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 11-12
7. Orthodox Hinduism was not in favour of re-conversion of the apostates and it was not till the rise of the Arya Samaj that re-conversion or *shudhi* was encouraged. The Muslims had set up Himayat-i-Islam and the Sikhs had established Jatt Singh Sabha for re-conversion to their respective faiths those who had embraced Christianity: the Christian proselytization had started with the advent of British rule in Punjab with official encouragement. A Shudhi Sabha was set up on 17 April 1893 with representatives from Singh Sabha, Jatt Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj, Sanatan Dharam Sabha and Pandit Sabha. Under the constitution of the Sabha, *shudhi* meant conversion or re-conversion from Christianity or Islam into Hindu or Sikh fold.
8. Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India*, 482
9. *Ibid.*, 482
10. H.H. Wilson, Tr., *The Visnu Purana*, 269-70
11. *The Penguin History of Early India*, 205
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 270-71
14. Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism*, 107

15. Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian*, 66-67
16. Although doctrinally Islam seems to make no distinction between man and woman yet the place of woman in Islamic society has ever remained unenviable. The prevalence of polygamy and the tradition not to allow female presence in mosques are only two of many such examples. However, there are traditions that the women are not to be prevented from attendance in the mosque when they ask for permission to do so. There are others in which they are definitely discouraged and told that for them prayer at home is more meritorious. See Cragg, *Muhammad and Christian*, 69
17. *Light of Truth*, p.13
18. Ganda Singh, " The Origin of Hindu Sikh Tension in the Panjab" in *The Panjab Past and Present*, Vol. XI-II, October 1977, 326
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28. Guru Granth Sahib, I, 471
29. See G.S. Sidhu, A Challenge to Sikhism. London: Ramgarhia Sikh Gurdwara, 1999
30. *The Penguin History of Early India*, 156-60
31. The Christians he had in mind were perhaps a legendary people to be rescued from Muslim encirclement who would help him in his crusades. For details, see Percival Spear, *A History of India*. Vol. II, 62
32. *Ibid.*, 63

33. *Travels in North India*, 41
34. *Historical Sketches of Indian Missions*, 27
35. J. Waskom Pickett, *The Mass Movement*, 45
36. Quoted in Harbans Singh, "Singh Sabha" in Harbans Singh and N. Gerald Barrier, eds. *Punjab Past and Present: Essays in Honour of Dr Ganda Singh*, 278
37. Ibid., 276
38. For a discussion on the contents of this letter, see E.R. Hambye, s.j., "A Contemporary Jesuit Document on Guru Arjan Dev's Martyrdom", in Harbans Singh and N. Gerald Barrier, eds. *Punjab Past and Present*, 1976, pp. 113-18
39. Ganda Singh, ed., *Early European Accounts of the Sikhs, 52*
40. Harold Coward, *Pluralism in World Religions: A Short Introduction*, 104
41. Guru Granth Sahib, Kabir, 1350

Chapter III

PLURALISM: A CANONICAL PERSPECTIVE

I

Sikhism is today one of the major world religions, and its followers are known as Sikhs. The origins of the word '*sikh*', now a part of Punjabi vocabulary, can be traced back to the Sanskrit word *shishya* which itself is derived from the root *shis* or *shas* meaning to 'correct, chastise, punish; to teach, instruct, inform': translated into English, the word *shishya* would mean pupil, disciple, learner. In Pali language, the word *shishya* became *sissa* and later *sekh* or *sekkha* which also means a pupil or one under training in a religious doctrine. In the Sikh tradition, the word *sikh* has come to denote a disciple of Guru Nanak and his nine spiritual successors and their teachings as embodied in their scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib.

Sikhism originated about five hundred years back: the first date in Sikhism is 1469, the year in which Guru Nanak, the founder of the faith, was born. It can be called the youngest of the major world religions. Thus, in terms of its growth and development on the dimension of history and time, it can well be taken as the latest stage in the evolution of religious consciousness of humankind. The nine successive spiritual successors of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) nourished and strengthened the tradition. Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the tenth Guru of the Sikh faith, just before his demise put an end to the institution of person-Guru and proclaimed Word or the revelatory Word as contained in the scripture as their Guru for all time to come. All the ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh, are acknowledged and accepted in the Sikh

tradition as one in spirit, the same Light pervading each different body.[1] Thereafter the same Light has come to reside in the Word as contained in the scripture. Following the spirit of the scripture, Sikhism understands itself not as another sectarian religion, but as a witness to the truth contained in, but transcending, all religions. The direct voice of this truth is the Guru Granth Sahib speaking as Guru to the world.[2]

The founder of the faith, Guru Nanak, is believed to have received revelation direct from the Absolute One. Having received the revelation, he took it upon himself to share it with mankind in general. He traveled far and wide, meeting masses in general as well as holy men of various religious traditions, in particular. He composed hymns and also collected hymns, which were in agreement with what he preached, of various holy men from other traditions. He established certain institutions to enable his followers to live the precepts he preached through his teachings. Before his demise, he appointed his spiritual successor, imparting his Light to him, thus Bhai Lahina became [Guru] Angad: the word 'angad' literally means 'of one's own limb'. Guru Angad, thus, became Nanak II. The spiritual succession went on for nine times until Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth spiritual preceptor, put an end to the institution of person-Guru. Thereafter, the scripture containing the revelatory Word, which was bestowed this status by the Tenth Guru, has been the Guru for the Sikhs.

The scripture was first compiled by Guru Arjan (1563-1606), the fifth Guru of the Sikh faith, in 1604: at that time, contributors to it included five of the ten Sikh Gurus and some other men of piety. These latter included some persons from the Bhakti and Sufi movements as well as some other holy men. All these contributors other than the Gurus are popularly called Bhaktas (Bhagats, in Punjabi), and the entire corpus (*bani*, in Sikh parlance) contributed by them has been clubbed under one nomenclature Bhagat-Bani or the compositions by the Bhaktas. Theologically,

all the scriptural hymns, may they be of Gurus or of any of these Bhaktas, are held in equal respect by the Sikhs: none is superior or inferior to the other. All the scriptural hymns, including those of the Gurus as well as of the Bhaktas as a whole constitute the Word (*sabda*) which was later given the status of the Guru, the Guru Eternal for the Sikhs.

When Guru Arjan compiled the scripture, Bhai Gurdas, a known poet and Sikh exegete, acted as an amanuensis with him. We cannot say with any amount of certainty as to on which day work on the compilation of the scripture was started, but it is sure that Bhai Gurdas completed the job of writing down the main text of the scripture on Bhadon *vadi ekam* Bikrami 1661 (1 August 1604). This is what we find written in the hand of Bhai Gurdas at the head of the contents of the *bir* or recension said to have been hand-written by him and now preserved with a Sodhi family at Kartarpur. The holy volume was then called Pothi (literally, volume) or Pothi Sahib (the suffix '*sahib*' is only an honorific), and is now popularly known as the Kartarpuri Bir. After getting the Holy Volume duly bound, it was installed in the newly constructed Harimandar (now popularly known to the Western world as the Golden Temple): the Sikh tradition believes that it was Bhadon *sudi ekam* of 1661 Bikrami when the scripture was installed there for the first time.

Although the scripture was formally compiled in AD 1604, much spade work had already been done by the preceding Gurus. Almost all the hagiographical accounts of the life of Guru Nanak relate that the Guru always kept a *pothi* (copy-book) under his arm during his preaching itineraries, thus implying that the work of compiling hymns (both of Guru's own and of some other holy men whose seats he happened to visit) had begun during the lifetime of Guru Nanak himself. The importance of *bani* and the need for its preservation were undoubtedly important factors: it remains a fact of history that the Gurus were well aware of the importance

of preserving their compositions and that they had also expressed this view in some of their hymns. Thus, we are of the view that Guru Nanak and his successors were all preserving their hymns and they handed over the codex/codices containing their compositions to their respective successors as the time of spiritual succession came.[3]

However, when Guru Arjan decided to take up the compilation of the scripture, he wanted to make sure that no genuine composition by any of his predecessors is left out. Although a major part of the material had come down to him along with the succession yet he sent out Sikhs to places far and near wherever he thought any composition of his predecessors could be found. This also tesities to the fact that history of the Sikh scriptural text is based on written tradition. No doubt, scriptural hymns were remembered and sung by many followers but written tradition was the premier tradition which flourished under the watchful eye of the first four Gurus. This oral tradition, also known as the *kirtan* tradition, followed the scribal tradition. The written tradition, we tend to believe began with the founder of the faith and which remained an ongoing process during the pontificate of the successive Gurus until it came down to Guru Arjan on his succession in a well nurtured form.[4]

The text as compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604 remained unaltered until 1706 when Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) added to it the hymns of his spiritual predecessor, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675), the ninth Guru of the Sikh faith. This enlarged volume, written in the hand of Bhai Mani Singh under the personal care of Guru Gobind Singh, was compiled at Damdama Sahib, a town in Bathinda district, where the Guru halted for about nine months after having evacuated Anandpur in December 1705 and having fought battles at Chamkaur and Khidrana (modern-day Muktsar). This volume has in the Sikh tradition come to be known as Damdami Bir or the holy volume prepared at the town of Damdama

Sahib. Thereafter there has been absolutely no addition or alteration whatever in the text of the scripture. It was this Holy Volume which was conferred the office of the Guru by Guru Gobind Singh before his demise at Nanded (Maharashtra) in 1708. The scripture has ever since been acknowledged and revered as the living Guru in Sikh tradition.

In its present form, the scripture comprises hymns of six of the Sikh Gurus (first five Gurus and the ninth Guru), in addition to the hymns of some holy persons from the Bhakti and Sufi movements and some other personages. The sixth, seventh and eighth Gurus did not compose any hymns, and Guru Gobind Singh preferred not to include his own compositions. In its present form, it comprises 1430 standard printed pages in bold print. It is written in Gurmukhi script and the entire text is versified, and a major part of it is divided into thirty-one *ragas* or musical measures. It is not just a scripture to the Sikhs, rather it is the living Guru, Guru Eternal for them. It was perhaps because of the unique position the scripture occupies in the Sikh tradition that Arnold Toynbee observed that it means to the Sikhs more than even the Quran is to the Muslims, the Bible is to the Christians and the Torah to the Jews.[5]

II

The Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, opens with what is popularly called the *Mul Mantra*: it is, in fact, not given any title-either *Mul Mantra* or any other. The text of the *Mul Mantra* comprises a few words/terms suggesting the attributes of God as articulated by Guru Nanak. Transliterated in Roman script, the text of the *Mul Mantra* would run as follows:

Ik oankar satinamu kartapurakhu nirbhau nirvair
akalmurati ajuni saibhan gurprasadi

A free rendering into English of the above text would mean that the Creator-Lord is one; call Him Eternal Truth; He is the supreme Creator-Being who is immanent in the creation; He knows

no fear and is at enmity with none; His being is formless and beyond time; He is not subject to birth in any form; He is self-existent; and it is only through the grace of the Divine that one can realize Him.

No doubt, the scripture as such stands as a one single whole, but an analysis of its structure reveals that there are in between the prologue (*Mul Mantra*-invocation) in the beginning and the epilogue (*Mundavani*-the prayer of thanksgiving) at the end thirty-three sections and various sub-sections. The first of these thirty-three sections following the *Mul Mantra* comprises the first thirteen printed pages and contains liturgical *banis* not assigned to any *raga* or musical measure. They include the *Japu*.

The following thirty-one sections are assigned to a *raga* each. This part of the scripture (pp. 14-1135) constitutes the major bulk of the corpus. Each of these thirty-one sections is further divided into two parts- the first carries the hymns of the Gurus and the second the Bhagat Bani, i.e. hymns of contributors other than the Gurus. Since all the Gurus composed hymns under the pseudonym of Nanak, Guru Arjan has put Mahla I, Mahla II, Mahla III and so on at the head of these hymns to indicate the specific authorship of a given hymn: here Mahla I stands for the first Guru, Guru Nanak; Mahla II stands for the second Guru, Guru Angad; and so on. The Bhagat-Bani has been recorded under the name of each of the contributors.

Following these thirty-one sections, we again have a section comprising miscellaneous compositions which are not assigned to any particular *raga* but have been composed in different poetic metres. Guru Arjan's *Mundavani* is a sort of epilogue to the scripture. It has two parts: in the first part, the scripture has metaphorically been referred to as a salver containing three articles-truth, contentment and contemplation. Then the fourth viand is mentioned–the nectar of Name Divine which sustains all. He who partakes of this fare is saved. In the second part, there are two

couplets by way of thanksgiving. Herein the Guru recites the paean while rendering his gratitude: Thou made me worthy of this task, O Lord. I know not the limit of thy favour. Meritless am I– without merit. That was thine own mercy...."

The scripture of the Sikh faith is unique in the sense that it was compiled and canonized by one of the preceptors of the faith during his lifetime and under his personal supervision. Second, its hymns have been so numbered as to preclude any possibility of apocryphal interpolation. It follows the standard pattern of beginning with an invocation and concluding with a prayer of thanksgiving. This invocation introduces us to the subject-matter to be dealt with in the coming pages. The prayer of thanksgiving is a part of the hymn titled *Mundavani* which is also taken as a seal beyond which nothing can be added. Like the invocatory *Mul Mantra*, *Mundavani* also tries to sum up the contents of the scripture as a whole.

The sections and sub-sections in between are meticulously planned, hymns first divided into *ragas*, and then arranged metre-wise as well as author-wise, each one of the sections or sub-sections beginning with the invocation, in its full or abridged form. Although these sections and sub-sections are assigned to different *ragas* yet in the Sikh tradition Word dominates the music. The scriptural hymns ought to be sung as per the specified raga or measure, and even then music must remain subordinate to the text being sung. The scripture has since been acknowledged as containing the revealed Word which descended through the Gurus. All ideals, institutions and rituals derive their meaning from this revelatory Word. It makes and moulds the Sikh way of life, is central to all that happens in the Sikh life and is the presiding Presence in all Sikh shrines the world over.

III

The Sikh scripture contains only the versified hymns in praise of God. Since the Sikh ontological belief perceives the Divine

manifested in the immanent, material world, there is emphasis, implicit as well explicit, in scriptural hymns on social and ethical concerns as well. This manifest material world is the abode of the Creator-Lord: the idea of this world being *maya* and thus a hindrance in the way of one's spiritual development stands rejected. A scriptural hymn defines the best of all religions as the one which favours remembrance of Name Divine along side performance of noble deeds in this life. Endeavours to better the human spiritual as well as social life need be made simultaneously. Service of humanity is deemed service rendered unto God Himself, and philanthropic and altruistic tendency in human behaviour is strongly recommended. According to the Sikh thought, God has not only created this manifest world, but He also resides in it and cares for it. Whenever He finds evil dominating over good in the affairs of the manifest world, He sends certain human beings to serve as His instruments of his will in the fight against evil and to ensure that righteousness (*dharma*) prevails. Since God cares for humankind and since the Sikh finds strength in God, every Sikh is required to live an active, useful and honest life, caring for fellow human beings as God cares for him.

Since a scripture (of revealed hymns) is an attempt to put into a mundane language intelligible to common people in a particular spatio-cultural context what has been revealed to the preceptor prophet either in a meta-language of no letters and sounds or making him utter what the Divine wills, without any interpolation or alteration on his part. The former is the Islamic and the latter the Sikh viewpoint of revelation. However, in either case, it is the truth unraveled, and to express a subtle concept like truth in a way that is comprehensible to common people, a number of symbols, signs and myths are woven into the text. That is why the task of explanation, exposition or exegesis and interpretation of a scriptural text for the benefit of the devotees as well as of

scholars has always remained on the mind of theologians and philosophers of each tradition.

The task of explaining the Sikh scripture began with the Gurus themselves. Taran Singh, a known Sikh theologian, is of the view that the major concepts and doctrines of the Sikh faith were articulated by the founder of the faith, Guru Nanak, and the succeeding Gurus explained and interpreted them to develop them further.[6] Grewal also holds that the "interpretation of Guru Nanak's bani began early with the compositions of his successors and has continued upto the present day.[7] Among the latter are several holy men, theologians, philosophers and intellectuals. All these exegetes and interpreters belonged to different schools of thought, with different stages of spiritual and intellectual development. That is why their explanation and interpretation of certain scriptural hymns differs from one another at certain points. In some cases, it is obviously different from what was perhaps originally meant and understood. The Sikh tradition accepts seven such exegetical traditions, and each of them has in its own way enriched the Sikh exegetical literature.[8]

Notwithstanding all these differences in the interpretation of hymns among the various schools of exegesis, there has ever been unanimity as regards the understanding of the principal concepts in the scripture. For example, all these schools accept the status of the scripture as the Guru Eternal for the Sikhs: they revere it, or more precisely the revealed Word as contained therein, as their living Guru. However, this reverence must not be confused with worship: Sikhism rejects worship of any idol or image, except the formless transcendent Real One. Even in the latter case, *nam simran*, remembrance of the Name of the Lord, is declared the best worship of God. *Nam simran*, according to the Sikh belief, is not mere mechanical repetition of one or the other attributive name of God, though recitation of hymns, preferably in *sangat* or company of the holy, helps man develop faith in the existence of

God and a sense of *bhai* or awe in the Divine Will: best remembrance of the Real One is by ever feeling and realizing His presence in all beings and at all places.

We need to add here that, besides the compositions from the Guru Granth Sahib, works of Bhai Gurdas[9] and Bhai Nand Lal[10] are also accepted in Sikhism as part of the approved canon. The Vars of Bhai Gurdas, a great poet and exegete, were, so goes the Sikh tradition, blessed by Guru Arjan himself as key to the understanding of Sikh scripture. All the compositions of Bhai Gurdas, *Vars* as well as *Kabitts*, are exegetical in nature, and they, especially his *Vars*, explain in simple language and with the help of symbols and metaphors from daily life the mystical nuances of the scriptural hymns. In these *Vars*, all important philosophical concepts and spirituo-ethical values have been thoroughly analyzed and explained, besides referring to various contemporary historical persons and events. All these explanations and elucidations have been unanimously accepted as in conformity with the vision of the Gurus.

The works of Bhai Nand Lal, who spent only a few years at Anandpur in the company of Guru Gobind Singh, bear a strong Sikh influence. They are a telling reaffirmation of the Sikh tenets as expounded in the scriptural hymns. If Bhai Gurdas takes in Sikhism, doctrines and ethics, in a comprehensive way, Bhai Nand Lal is more for laying down some ethical formulations, and for this he draws upon the Sikh scripture to re-inforce their validity. Among some of his formulations are the need to overcome self-glorification (*cf. Zindaginama*), not to be a parasite and live on the charity of others and not to be dishonest in trade, to avoid adultery (*cf. Zindaginama*), not to injure anyone since the Creator-Lord is the soul and life of the created beings, etc. His *rahitnama* has been in the form of a dialogue between the poet and Guru Gobind Singh. He has used this style perhaps to impress upon the

reader the genuineness and urgency of the formulations mentioned therein.

The scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, is central to the Sikh faith and the Sikh community. All the metaphysical doctrines and tenets of the Sikh faith are derived from it. It is a living Guru for the Sikh devotees, and they seek guidance from it in their personal and communal affairs. Any injury to its soul (any interpolation in or alteration of the text or distortion of the meaning of a verse) or body (tearing or burning of the Holy Volume or a part of it) is considered a sacrilege. Because of the central place occupied by the scripture, the Sikhs are known as people of the Book: they revere it and have abiding faith in it, or more precisely in the Word as contained therein. As it is, the Guru Granth Sahib has been both the result and the foundation of the belief-systems of the Sikh faith. It has been the result because it verbalizes the revelation as experienced by their Gurus and certain other holy persons. It is also perceived to be the foundation because this revelatory experience, as uttered in the mundane language, becomes the permanent point of reference for the creedal articulations of the Sikh faith. We have used the words 'perceived to be' because the real foundation of the Sikh faith is not the scripture but the experience as recorded in it. Besides, the scripture is also normative as it serves as the basis of the code of conduct and ethics governing the life of the followers as well as the bond to keep the community together. The former helps in the creation of a social set-up wherein prevail the values of equality and love, justice and self-respect, compassion and altruism. The latter provides the follower-community a distinct identity.

IV

At the time of the origin of Sikh religion, two streams of culture-forms, broadly represented by Hinduism and Islam, ran parallel, with scarce points of contact and accommodation with each other. Hinduism at that time was a polytheistic, iconographic

and ascetic religion whereas Islam was monotheistic, iconoclastic and socially motivated and practical. The former had developed a rigidly corseted social structure whereas the latter had a liberal social outlook; the former's religious outlook was apparently tolerant whereas the latter was obviously exclusivistic in its religious belief and bigot in practice. Despite the significant efforts of the Bhakti and Sufi movements, both these two mutually exclusivistic culture-forms refused to step significantly down from their respective rigidities because the protagonists of both these movements had their basic framework determined by the religions they belonged to and each one of them failed to provide consistency to the ideology he happened to preach. Their effors were more individualistic, with little coordinated endeavour. However, this does not in any way lessen on the importance of the role they played in bringing both the communities closer.

The central metaphysical doctrine of the Sikh faith is the unitary and dynamic nature of God. God is one, and this oneness of God is strongly emphasized in the Sikh scripture and tradition. The dynamic nature of God implies His creative aspect: He is the creator of the entire manifest material phenomena. He not only creates (from His own self and out of His own volition) but also manifests Himself, *qua* Spirit, in the entire created phenomena. He is thus present in all beings and things and places throughout the universe(s). This lends spiritual character to the mundane social reality. We can also say that God's presence in the mundane reality spiritualizes the social, and, at the same time, this socializes the Spiritual also. It is in this sense that Sikhism considers this mundane world and all that exists/inhabits herein as reality, though a relative reality. The latter is real because it has the Divine essence manifesting in it but since it is not ever-lasting like its Creator, the Real One, it is only relative reality.

This view of Sikhism is unlike the thinking of most of the earlier Indian religious traditions which negated both the self and

the world. They held that humankind as well as this manifest material phenomena was unreal. Thus, some traditions recommended torture of body for the welfare/emancipation of the soul. This phenomenal world was called *mithia* or *maya,* and human was advised to free himself from the snare of this *maya* so as to achieve mystical communion with the Absolute. In other words, renouncing the world was a pre-condition for treading on the path towards spiritual enlightenment. This justified the ascetic tendency among the *sramanic* traditions (Jainism and Buddhism) and some sects among Hinduism. As a result of this, welfare of humanity/society remained nobody's concern, and this led to general degeneration of society. On the other hand, Islam, another major religion then prevalent in India, though Semitic in origin, considers this world real. However, Islam accepts eternal duality between the Creator and the creation, thus denying the latter any spiritual unity with the Lord. Thus, the Sikh view of the affirmation of the self and the world is significantly different from both the Indian and Islamic view.

The doctrine of man being the spiritual manifestation of the Divine serves in Sikhism as the basis of the idea of social equality of humankind. Human being has in some scriptural hymns been called a sum total of an essentially divine life-force (soul) and the perishable body comprising of five perishable elements. The former is housed in the latter and gives life to it. What apparent differences we see amongst various human beings belong to the exterior only: the differences in colour, language, dress, and personal appearance are the result of the differences in one's spatio-cultural background. Within this varied exterior lies the same divine essence, that is the soul which is a Divine particle. A scriptural hymn calls it *ram ki ans* or a particle of God. Guru Gobind Singh reiterates the same idea when he states that people belonging to different religious denominations are essentially one. In other words, we can say that Sikhism acknowledges all humans as spiritually one with the Creator-Lord and equal among themselves,

one's creed, caste or family-name notwithstanding. No one among the entire humankind is better or worse, higher or lower than the other on the basis of one's birth in a particular creed or caste. As a Christian theologian has put it, "People of other faiths are not on average noticeably better human beings than Christians, but nor on the other hand are they on average noticeably worse human beings. We find that both the virtues and the vices are, so far as we can tell, more or less equally spread among the population of whatever major faith– and here I include Humanism and Marxism as major (though secular rather than religious) faiths."[11] What makes a person better or worse than the other is the kind of deeds he or she does during his/her lifetime in this world. One who performs good deeds is a god and the one who performs bad, evil deeds is demon: He who performs good, noble deeds, is deemed godly in this world whereas he who does bad, evil deed is referred to as demonic by the people.[12] However, if one in the 'godly' category leans towards evil ways, he is sure to fall into the 'demons' category, and similarly, if one in the 'demons' category imbibes goodness, he can raise himself to the 'godly' category.

Sikhism recommends a two-fold approach to life. It tries to keep close to each other the parallel streams of humankind's esoteric and exoteric life, to maintain a balance between this-worldly and the other-worldly life. The Sikh religion stands for the unity of God who has in the scriptural hymns been articulated as the sole creator of the entire manifest phenomena and who is also said to be immanent, qua Spirit, amongst His entire creation. It does not consider this world mere *maya*, something to be shunned by whosoever wants to attain the ultimate object of life. On the other hand, it considers this and all other universes (relatively) true. This spiritual character of the mundane world is stated in more obvious words by Guru Angad Dev, the second Guru of the Sikh faith, when he says that his world is the abode of the Lord and He resides in it. And, a social reality wherein

Lord-God is immanent cannot be termed false or *mayaic*, rather renunciation of it would virtually imply going away from God. Thus, Sikhism accepts social reality as relative reality and strongly rejects the idea of renunciation of the world and worldly life. Lest this should be misunderstood as license for unbridled indulgence, Sikhism exhorts man not to be of this world while still living a normal life of filial and social obligations. At the same time, this also implies the concern of Sikh religion for human life in this world, to better the individual life and also transform the world as a whole into Sach Khand (or the abode of the Lord) by protecting the good and the saintly and eradicating the evil and the demonic.

If this mundane world is real (relatively real) and the ideal of God-realization is attainable during this very life and in this very world, the latter's moral and spiritual well-being also becomes the concern of the Divine. Human beings become instruments in the hands of the Divine for the prevalence of humanly realizable divine values in human societal affairs. Sikhism works for the simultaneous spiritual as well as ethical development of humankind. It is of the view that religion is embedded in society but at the same time religion also happens to be the fount of the moral and ethical standards guiding human life in society. This also includes fostering an attitude of tolerance and acceptance towards other religions so that relations among human beings belonging to different faith-communities become peaceful and harmonious. That is why Guru Arjan included both the remembrance of Divine and the performance of good, noble deeds in the definition of an ideal religion. The Sikh canonical literature criticizes and condemns those spiritually enlightened beings who renounce the world and worldly life in favour of their spiritual ideal, because in that situation there will be no one to take care of the well being of the mundane world (human life in this world) in their absence.

Doctrinally, Sikhism lays equal emphasis on the spiritual as well as the moral uplift of man: in one of the hymns as included in the scripture, Guru Nanak declares that truthful life in this world is higher than the Truth itself. The concept of *miri-piri*, though popularly accepted to have come into existence with Guru Hargobind, the sixth spiritual preceptor of the faith, is fundamental to the spiritual perception and the mission initiated by the founder of the faith, Guru Nanak. As an idea, it can be found laid down in the hymns of Guru Nanak-completely, succinctly and emphatically. Sikhism provides a doctrinal basis for man to actively participate in the socio-political struggles aimed at the eradication of oppression and injustice. Most of the other contemporary socio-political systems, organizations or societies forbade man to get involved in such a struggle, rather they preferred to leave this task for gods or divine incarnations to perform this task on behalf of humankind. History stands witness to the social degeneration and political subjugation the nation suffered as a result of this attitude.

The ancient Indian history is also replete with examples of many a struggle taking place between Good and Evil. The presence of the human element, suffering underwent and supreme sacrifice made by the human beings should have been the central motif in that struggle. However, we find, especially in the Hindu Puranic literature, that the intervention by Divine must invariably take place on behalf of the Good to make it succeed. This minimized the significance of human endeavour, his suffering and sacrifice, and gave the entire credit for everything to the Divine. The tradition of self-inflicted suffering and torture and the divine intervention in all the struggles fought for the sake of truth and values are the two most important reasons which perhaps explain for the absence of any Indian equivalent for the words like *shahid* or *shahadat*. Guru Gobind Singh's call for heads on the Vaisakhi day of AD 1699 when he created the Khalsa Panth was also symbolically aimed at changing this thinking of human beings. Sikhism wants

a high sense of responsibility in society, and it was to this end in view that the Khalsa was created.

The Sikh concept of equality is all-inclusive, making no distinction between man and woman, man and man on the basis of his creed, caste, colour, sex or race. All outward differentiations between man and man and man and woman are immaterial-whether of colour, creed, dress or language. A woman has within her the same divine spark and thus enjoys the same unity with God and with other human beings, her biological differentiations notwithstanding. Rather she being the mother of humankind without whom human species cannot go on deserves better treatment, more respect, says a scriptural hymn. The Sikh stress on householder's life and condemnation of evils like *sati* (immolation of a widow on the pyre of her husband) and *purdah* (veil used by women to cover the face) also aim at putting woman on a pedestal of respect in social life. Female infanticide or foeticide, transaction of money in marriage, and infidelity in marital relations are some of the very serious problems which pose a challenge to the modern-day society. Obviously, all these are related to woman's place in society. The Sikh *rahitnama* literature forbids female infanticide/foeticide, condemns transaction of money in marriage and proclaims observance of fidelity as equally obligatory for man as well as for woman. This spiritual unity and all-inclusive equality of humankind forms the basis of love and compassion, selfless service and altruism, justice and self-respect in human social relations.

We find that some of the religions at the time of Guru Nanak followed an attitude of religious exclusivism, claiming for themselves monopoly over truth and rejecting other faiths as inauthentic and other faith-communities as pagan. Religious exclusivism has been used to convert others, thereby implying that the faith of the other was invalid and inauthentic or at least inferior: people belonging to majority community tend to adopt

this attitude in the name of homogenization, though the euphemism used is 'nationalism'. This coupled with the recent trend to check religious resurgence mistaking it as religious orthodoxy are the other factors causing mistrust and hatred among different faith-communities and civilizations. The Sikh Gurus were much ahead of their times when they favoured what we today call religious pluralism and inter-faith dialogue to bring about understanding and harmony amongst people belonging to different religions and races. Guru Nanak was perhaps the first personage in the religious history of humankind who initiated inter-faith dialogue and proclaimed that no individual, caste or creed can claim monopoly over truth: revelation cannot be religion-specific, region-specific or caste-specific. He was of the view that listening first to the other's point of view and then giving forth your own was the only way to reach the ultimate truth.

V

Sikhism, one in the category of major revelatory religions of the world, traces its roots to the revelation received by Guru Nanak, the founder of the faith. Guru Nanak had had a mystic vision of God during his stay at Sultanpur Lodhi around 1499. According to the *janam-sakhi* (traditional life-accounts of Guru Nanak) accounts, Guru Nanak used to go to the nearby Bein rivulet for bathing daily in the morning. According to a local tradition, he also used to have discourse with a Muslim holy man, Allah Ditta, who had his hut there on a bank of the rivulet. One day, as was his wont, Nanak went to have his bath in the Bein rivulet close to the town, but did not return home for some days. Some people thought that he had drowned in the rivulet while some others felt that he might have disappeared fearing some misappropriation in the store (*modikhana*) of Daulat Khan, chief of Sultanpur, where he worked. However, the accounts of the *modikhana* were found to be in perfect order when checked.

The Janam-Sakhi sources say that during this while Guru Nanak was 'summoned' by Nirankar (the Formless God) who revealed the Truth to him. It is said that he was served, with Divine sanction, 'a bowl of nectar'. The first words he uttered after he came out of his trance were: there is no Hindu and there is no Musalman. This caused a furore throughout the town of Sultanpur which was then an important centre of Islamic learning. Emperor Aurangzib is said to have received his education here.[15] Such an utterance during a regime that followed a policy of religious exclusivism was not devoid of danger. But people dyed in the love of God fear not earthly monarchs. By this utterance, Guru Nanak implied that he took the entire humankind as one brotherhood, one in essence with the Divine Creator, and that he gave little importance to the human religious denominations. In fact, this has been the thrust of several of the scriptural hymns wherein the entire humankind is declared the children of One God and any differentiation between man and man on the basis of creed stands strongly rejected. In this regard, Guru Arjan in one of his hymns says:

All sit in Thy hope, O My Lord!
Thou abidest in all beings;
All are called partners in Thy grace,
Thou art seen alien to none.[16]

Bhakta Kabir reiterates the same doctrine of the essential oneness of the entire humankind when, in one of his hymns as included in the Sikh scripture, he says:

First of all God created Light,
Then by His Omnipotence created all beings;
From one Light has come up the entire world,
Then who is good and who is bad?
O humans! Stray ye not in doubt, my brethren:
Creation is in the Creator,

Creator is in the creator;
He prevails at all the places.[17]

Again, Guru Gobind Singh also reiterates the idea when he directs that the entire humankind be acknowledge as one notwithstanding their different religious denominations:

Some people call themselves *mundia*;
Some call themselves *sannyasis* and others *yogis*;
Some are Hindus, and
Others are Turks or Hafizi or Imamsafi;
But consider thou the entire humankind as one.
The same One is the Creator-Lord, and
He is the compassionate provider of bread.
Consider none other as His co-eternal;
Never accept any duality;
To serve the only One is our duty,
He alone is the Guru of all.
All humankind has the same essence,
And all of them be taken as of one Light.[18]

In another verse of the same composition, Guru Gobind Singh makes reference to various differences of exterior but stresses that beneath these there is essential oneness amongst the entire humankind. He says:

The temple and the mosque,
The [Hindu] worship and the [Muslim] *namaz* are the same;
Entire humankind is one, though apparently seems varied.
Gods and demons, yaksha, gandharvas, Turks and Hindus–
All these are just different denominations
Under the influence of regions and vestures.
Each one has the same eyes, same ears, same body and same tongue;
All are made of earth, air, fire and water.
Allah and Brahman are the same,
The Puranas and the Quran are the same;

All humans are of the same essence, and
They all are made of the same elements.[19]

The unity of God is the central doctrine of Sikh metaphysics. Of course, there has been no conscious attempt by the Gurus to prove the existence of God: the divine presence is taken as obviously apparent. Then, the Real One of the Sikh perception is the Lord-creator of this entire manifest material reality which also gets spiritualized by the divine immanence in it. When we study different religions, we find that most of the major world religions aim at experiencing this one divine reality, though they experience it in different forms according to different cultural environments. This involves a distinction between 'God as infinite being' and 'God as finitely experienced'. From a phenomenological point of view, this distinction is present in all the major religions of the world. On the one hand, God is beyond conceptualizing powers of the human mind, and on the other, He is related to or worshipped through human perceptions or images. A scriptural hymn says:

The Vedas know not His greatness;
Brahma does not His mystery understand;
The (divine) incarnations fail to comprehend His limit;
Infinite is the Transcendent Lord.
His immensity only He knows;
Others speak only from heresay.
Siva knows not the ways of God;
Even gods have grown weary searching for Him;
The goddesses also know not His mystery;
The invisible Lord is beyond all.[20]

It is not possible for human intellect to fully understand the Absolute. He is immense and fathomless. Different religions refer to Him but they do not describe Him truly and in full detail and with certainty because no one can possibly do that.[21] In this behalf there are several scriptural hymns indicating human incapability to comprehend the ultimate reality fully. "None can fathom God

although many yogis, celebates, ascetics and other learned men have tried their best", says a scriptural hymn.[22]

This implies that God is one and the same but this divine spirit finds expression in various cultural forms as the world faiths. In other words, we also say that at the level of experience, different religions portray a genuine, though different, encounter with the same divine. Different beliefs and practices of varied religions reflect the cultural forms and circumstance which embody the experiences. We tend to agree with John Hick that discrepancies between the faiths at the level of theological statement can be interpreted more as an occasion for reconciliation in the greater all-encompassing truth of the infinite divine reality than for rivalry. Referring to the diversity of religions, a theologian has rightly said that "God's voice speaks in many languages, communicating itself in a diversity of intuitions. The work of God never comes to an end. No word is God's last word."[23]

The Sikh scripture is a very good and concrete example of the statement that revelation cannot be religion-specific or region-specific or caste-specific or person-specific. The claim to truth cannot be the monopoly of any one particular religion. Each expression of revelation is considered an attempt to encounter and understand the Real One in a particular localized historical context. The origin of the divine light in the world is neither eastern nor western, but the metaphors with which divine revelation is expressed in a mundane language are necessarily one. The Sikh belief in this doctrine is testified by the fact that contributors to the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, include holy persons from other religious traditions as well. There are Hindu holy men from the Bhakti movement and Mulsim saints from the Sufi movement. Among the former are included Kabir, Namdev, Jaidev, Ravidas, and others. Sheikh Farid and Bhikhan belong to the Sufi tradition. Then there have been Bhatts and others who were devout followers of the Sikh Gurus. Since the entire corpus comprising

the scripture is believed to be revelatory in character, it implies that revelation is not confined to the Sikhs Gurus only or to the Hindu saints or Muslim Sufis or anyone else. All these hymns, irrespective of authorship, enjoy equal reverence from the devotees and all these hymns together were bestowed the office of Guru by the Tenth Master.

These contributors to the scripture come not only from different religious backgrounds but also from different castes including the so-called low castes (*sudras*) and oppressed classes (*dalits*). Kabir was, for example, a weaver, Ravidas was a cobbler, Namdev a calico-printer, Dhanna was a peasant, and so on. According to the then prevalent Brahamanic view, people belonging to this co-called lower strata of society were not eligible for receiving spiritual enlightenment. They were even debarred from entering a place of worship or listening to a scripture being recited or explained. Anyone found violating this rule was liable to severe punishment. Guru Arjan, while compiling the scripture, included their hymns along side those of the Gurus, thus bestowing on their hymns the revelatory status they genuinely deserved. The Sikh rejection of the doctrine of Truth or revelation being the monopoly of a particular (higher) caste was a revolutionary step in the given circumstances and it was a great leap towards building bridges between communities belonging to different caste-groups.

These contributors to the Sikh scripture do not belong to any particular region also. They come from very far off and different parts of India. The Sikh Gurus, for example, belong to Punjab, Kabir and Ravidas to Kashi in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Namdev to the state of Maharashtra, Jaidev to Bengal, Dhanna to Rajasthan, and so on. Some hymns of these holy personages were chosen for inclusion in the scripture on the basis of their ideological affinity with those of the Gurus. Thus, the Sikh viewpoint made an emphatic statement that if revelation is not religion-specific or caste-specific, it is not region-specific also. All spiritual preceptors

of the world belonging to different places and races are holy and venerable. The hymns rendered by these holy men in the language and idiom of their region and time are so integrated as to find correspondence with the theme or motifs in the compositions of the Gurus. The elevation of their verses to such a high level meant to salute the power of the Word in whatever region or form it might reveal the glory of God. Obviously, the idea in the mind of Guru Arjan was to establish the fundamental unity of all religions and mystic experiences. It will be absolutely wrong to call it an attempt at syncretizing, rather it is an integral congress of minds and souls operating on the same spiritual plane.

All these holy men did not belong to one era, either. Chronologically, Sheikh Farid (1173-1265), happens to be the earliest among the contributor to the Sikh scripture. He is followed by Jaidev (1201-1245), Trilochan (1267-1335), Namdev (1270-1350), and so on. Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675), the ninth Nanak, happens to be chronologically the last. Put together, all the contributors represent the human spiritual wisdom of five long centuries. The inclusion in the Sikh scripture of a fairly substantial number of compositions by certain God-inspired poets belonging to an era spread over five centuries is a fact important enough to be noted. No doubt, the Guru Granth Sahib is today the scripture of the Sikh faith, but its contents and message give it a much wider representational status: it goes much beyond sectarian considerations and makes it the heritage of entire humankind.

Truth or revelation is, thus, not the monopoly of any particular individual or creed or caste or region or era. Sikhism is against the idea of limiting the experience of the divine to any particular manifestation of it. Similarly, God cannot be confined to any particular place, to a place of worship belonging to any particular community. His presence is universal. He pervades, qua Spirit, in all beings and all places. His presence cannot be limited to either mosque or temple or any other shrine. He is present

within the hearts of all humans and He pervades all places. In this respect, a hymn from the scripture says:

If God abides in the mosque alone,
Then to whom does the rest of the world belong?
According to Hindus, the Lord's Name abides in idols,
But I see no truth in both.

.....

God of Hindus dwells in the south;
God of Muslims has His seat in the West;
Search thou in thy heart,
Yea, thou search for Him in thy heart,
For this alone is the abode of God.[24]

Unlike some other religions which were intolerant of other faiths and treated them as invalid or inferior, Sikhism favours acceptance and appreciation of other faiths. Although all religions are not the same, yet Sikhism expects all religions to be equal participants in the struggle for eco-human welfare. It considers people belonging to different religious denominations as one, in essence, even though they might follow different religious rites and practices. In fact, Sikhism emphasizes that man's spiritual development is not possible without ethical uplift. In the absence of the latter, all rites and rituals become meaningless. From among the prevalent dominant religions of Hinduism and Islam, their priestly classes are severely criticized for their stress on ritualism, formalism and lack of ethical values. The Sikh scripture is known for its catholic character, completely free from any bias, animus and polemic. This feature comes out with all the more prominence when one thinks of the obscurantism, factionalism and fanaticism that prevailed in the then contemporary society. God, as we have said earlier, is not confined to any particular place of worship-either temple or mosque or whatever. God is the Creator-Lord of the entire humankind, and He pervades both Hindus and Muslims, Christians and Jews, the high and the low.

The faith in the universal presence of God implicitly condemns the desecration and destruction of sacred places belonging to a faith-community other than one's own. Such a policy of religious intolerance was followed by both the Semitic religions in India. The Portuguese, conquered Goa in 1510 and acquired a reputation for cruelty and perfidy: in religion they were intolerant to the extent of allowing no Hindu temple in Goa. During the time when Sikhism originated and evolved, there were many instances of the places of Hindu worship being demolished by the Muslim rulers. We forget that the desecration of a religious place belonging to any faith is desecration of the Divine Presence itself. A modern-day Christian theologian says:

> Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.[25]

No doubt, Sikhism is appreciative and tolerant of other faith traditions, but this acceptance of the relevance of other faiths is not passive: it is critical. It seems to agree with the possibility, as hinted by Toynbee, that God's revelation of himself has been received in history according to different cultural contexts, but it realizes that theological tolerance for tolerance's sake usually results in indifference, the view which counts all faiths as the same. The Sikh Gurus seem to have realized that if all religions are made relative, it could undermine concern to distinguish good from bad, the spiritually wholesome and profound from the spiritually poor and moribund. One cannot become neutral to all values to become a pluralist. This gave birth to a critical spirit in Sikhism which is quite explicit on at least two very vital points. One, some of the Sikh scriptural hymns are highly critical of the sanctions and safeguards in any tradition favouring hierarchical division of mankind. The idea of inequality by birth among people is not

acceptable to Sikhism. The Sikh theology rejects the doctrine of inherent inequality among humans and ineligibility of the so-called lower-caste people to achieve the spiritual objective. One does not become a Brahman, a person of high caste, simply by being born in a particular caste/family, rather Brahman is he who reflects on Brahman (God) and who is spiritually enlightened and ethically uplifted. Guru Amar Das, Nanak III, says in one of his hymns included in the scripture:

Brahman is the one
Who understands the Lord
And concentrates on His Name day and night.
On the advice of the True Guru,
He practices truth and self-restraint, and
Gets rid of the malady of ego.[26]

Another scriptural hymn says:

One becomes a Brahman only if
One knows the supreme Lord and
Abides by the True Guru's will;
One who utters Lord's praises and
Amasses virtues and blends his soul with the supreme Soul.
In this age, rare are the Brahmans
Who concentrate on the Lord.
O Nanak, he on whom God casts His merciful glance,
Remains attuned to the Name Divine.[27]

Birth in a so-called high or low caste is given little consideration in the Sikh thought. "Preposterous is caste and vain the glory; Lord alone gives shade to all beings; If someone calls himself good, his goodness can be known only if his honour is accepted in God's account", says a scriptural hymn.[28] In another of his hymns, Guru Nanak identifies himself with the lowly among the lowest in the hierarchically divided social structure:

[Nanak seeks the company of}

Those who are low among the lowest;
He prefers to stand with them
Rather than have the company of the high.[29]

Secondly, Sikhism opposes a religion that mobilizes mass support in the name of religion with the object of actually serving the interest of a ruling political class against the weal of common humankind. The Sikh Gurus were well aware of the danger of religion becoming an instrument of political dominance in the hands of a select few. Therefore, they in their hymns criticized the Hindu (the Brahmans) as well as the Muslim (the Mull'ah and the *qazi*) clergy for their role in misusing religion for the purpose of retaining status quo in which their elitist status vis-à-vis other castes/classes continues. According to the Sikh scripture, the status of *qazi* cannot be conferred on anyone, rather a *qazi* is one who practices and lives truth.[30] However, in the contemporary life the qazis had given up truthfulness in life and had been telling lies and eating filth (earning through dishonest means).[31] Similarly, the Brahmans, who claim to be 'twice-born' and constitute the priestly class in Hinduism, go for ablutions (at sacred places) but slay human beings (do injustices to them).[32] The Sikh scripture criticizes the priestly classes when they work in tandem with the corrupt and unjust political authorities to help maintain the prevailing oppressive status quo. In other words, Sikh scripture wants religion to work for the welfare of common man, to bring about love, equality and compassion in human social relations.

The Sikh Gurus changed the very concept of religion by denying in the new faith any place to clergy and by eradicating all distinctions of high and low between man and man. All humans are equal and any Sikh otherwise capable can lead the liturgical services. On the other hand, the priestly classes in other religions are censured because they proclaim their path, their guruship rather than God's, and so lead the people into sectarian dispute.[33] It is

also in keeping with this idea that voices are being raised against the recent growth of *deravad* in Sikhism. The two priestly classes in Hinduism and Islam are especially criticized on other counts as well. The Brahmans favoured the hierarchical division of society and endeavoured to maintain the status quo so as to retain their pre-eminent position in society. The Mulla'hs and Qazis during the Muslim rule in India tried to interpret scriptures to justify many of the unjust actions of the rulers performed by them not out of any religious obligation but out of pure political expediency. As we said earlier, the Gurus in their professions and practice made no distinction between man and man, and they sided themselves with the lowly, the oppressed and the suppressed. They also used religion to do away the evils of injustice, oppression and exploitation and rather used it as an instrument for social change.

However, the Sikh criticism and condemnation is generally of various arid and effete practices in other traditions. No scripture-Indian or Semitic-is condemned or rejected. Neither the Vedas (Hindu scriptures) nor the Qateb (Semitic scriptures) are called false, rather false are said to be those who do not contemplate upon and comprehend these scriptures.[34] Similarly, Sikhism does not appreciate or condemn a particular community's place of worship over and above/against that of any other. It reveres all of them but declares that God is all-pervasive and is not limited to any of them. The message of the scripture is for the entire humankind and "the entire humankind is taken as partner in the world commonwealth, and none seems alien" to it. As for the subaltern classes which were denied any access to spirituality in the pre-Sikhism days, Sikhism has a special place for them. In his hymns as well as during his lifetime, Guru Nanak always preferred to be on the side of the lowly. According to Sikh theology, religion should not remain just an asylum for the voiceless and the hapless, rather it should be made a weapon in the hands of the oppressed class against the unjust oppressor.

We must respect other religions notwithstanding our disagreements and differentiations in regard to outward symbols and rituals. That is why the Sikh scripture advises everybody to be true to his or her faith: a Muslim should be a true Muslim and a Hindu should become a true Hindu. One must imbibe the required spiritual and ethical virtues before calling oneself a Muslim. Guru Nanak says:

There are five prayers, five times for prayers,
and they have five names;
First is truthfulness, second honest earning, third charity in God's name,
Fourth is pure intent and mind, and fifth the Lord's praise.
Repeat thou the creed of good deeds, and
Then call thyself a Muslim.[35]

A little ahead, Guru Nanak again takes up the issue and says that 'it is difficult to become a Muslim; one must imbibe these qualities if one really wants to be called a Muslim: first, such a person ought to deem sweet the religion of the Lord's devotees, and have the pride of pelf effaced as rasped with a scraper; one should become a true disciple of the Prophet and put aside the illusion of death and life; should heartily submit to the will of God, worship the Creator-Lord and efface his ego; should be compassionate towards all beings-only then can such a person call himself a Muslim.[36] In other words, one can be true to his faith if only he is spiritually aligned to the Lord and is loving and compassionate to his fellow beings. Rather than endeavouring to convert others unto itself, Sikhism advises one to imbibe these values and be true to one's faith. Sikhism emphatically believes that any attempt, overt or covert, at conversion would amount to taking the other's faith as inferior or invalid. One ought to be respectful to other religions without putting his own faith/ conviction into parenthesis. Also, Sikhism seeks to unite people

belonging to different religious traditions into a broader unity: Sikh theology holds that the object of religion is not to divine mankind, but to unite it; 'not to act like scissor and tear asunder the social fabric, but to act like a needle and sew it together.'[37] It calls for respect for all religions, tolerance for religious plurality, and understanding and cooperation among different faith-communities- a fundamental principle of religious pluralism.

As a Christian theologian has put it, "there can never be just one of anything....The one-way road is most likely the road to destruction. Perhaps this is the abiding meaning of the story of the Tower of Babel : the Lord God warned against the havoc inherent in all dreams or projects for a monolithic, one way vision of reality." [38] This is somewhat akin to the message contained in a hymn included in the Sikh scripture wherein all religious paths have been declared valid and wherein is also rejected the idea of only one Saviour. The idea that my prophet or my spiritual teacher is the only Saviour to lead humanity on the road to salvation is alien to Sikhism. On the other hand, it takes different religions as divine revelations made known by the prophets or spiritual preceptors at different times in different spatio-cultural contexts. It accepts each one of the prophets and the traditions founded by them as valid paths towards God-realization and self-realization. In one of his hymns as included in the Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Amar Das declares all religious traditions as valid as he prays to Lord "to save by Thy grace the world which is burning in the fire of passion, to save it the way Thou consider best."[39] This is like the twentieth century American poet and mystic, Walt Whitman, who accepted "a hundred, a thousand other Saviours and mediators and Bibles."

Lest this understanding and appreciation of other religions should remain an abstract idea, it is necessary to promote a dialogical relationship between different faith-communities. In fact,

dialogue is an encounter when people holding different claims about ultimate reality meet together to explore these claims in a context of mutual respect. From dialogue we expect to discern more about how God is active in our world, and to appreciate for their own sake the insights and experiences people of other faiths have of ultimate reality. Interfaith dialogue dissolves rigidities of religious exclusiveness and brings about inter-religious understanding and inter-community accommodation, unity and harmony. This helps us, what Smith says in the Christian context, revise our "theological assertion that would divide the humankind into two groups-ourselves who are saved and the rest of the world who are damned."[40] Obviously, the object of dialogue is not just to know the different viewpoints but to "enter into serious exchange with each other in order to help humanity-including of course ourselves-find adequate orientation in today's world.... construct religious frameworks that can provide genuine guidance with respect to the unprecedented problems we today confront...."[41] Dialogue, especially interfaith dialogue, is not merely a way of being nice to one another. It is more than affirmation, appreciation and admiration. It is engagement with the other, not simply a pleasant talk. A genuine dialogue involves challenging, correcting, criticizing and truly learning from one another. Mutual witnessing and sharing the conviction form part of the dialogue: it is mutual witnessing, not a one-way street.

The Sikh scripture is quite emphatic in bringing about the significance of interfaith dialogue. It states that "man throughout his worldly existence must seek to converse with others by first listening to others' viewpoint and then putting forward his own, for this is the only way to attain truth"[42] The notions of listening to the others' viewpoint (*kichhu suniai*) and putting forward your own viewpoint (*kichhu kahiai*) clearly urge fruitful dialogue aimed at searching for the truth. The Sikh scripture categorically rejects

polemics, insisting, rather, that only after polemic has been set aside can the real search for truth begin and bear fruit."[43] Polemic and argumentation cause-and are also caused by–the ego which in the Sikh scripture is referred to as a 'serious malady, but humility, a pre-requisite for genuine listening to another, is the essence of all virtues.[44] Thus, Sikh scripture clearly teaches that we are to cultivate humility, sharing our own views while we listen to the views of others, for only then can we all progress on the path to truth.

The best example of interfaith dialogue in the Sikh scripture is Guru Nanak's *Sidh Gosti* which is a sort of spiritual dialogue on the Sikh philosophy of life vis-à-vis the philosophy of yoga. In this composition, the yogis put searching questions to Guru Nanak who answers them with courtesy and confidence. The dialogue is held without hurting the feelings of any of the participants, ever retaining serenity and sobriety and aiming at realizing the truth. This is the basis as well as the ideal of interfaith dialogue in Sikhism. Other examples of dialogue can be found within the hymns of Bhagats. Certain *slokas,* especially of Kabir and Farid have been frequently held up and commented upon by the Gurus for the way they make use of dialogue rather than polemic as a means for clarifying or expanding God's message to humanity.

VI

The modern-day world suffers from the problems of mutual distrust and disharmony, oppression and violence, and if we have to set the world free from these and such other evils, we must "see others as our brothers and sisters, we need to discover how to affirm our own identity...without threatening the identity of others."[45] This happens to be the central message of the Sikh faith, which says that the idea of God's love for all teaches us to accept and value the other in his or her otherness. It considers all religions and their revelations valid, appreciates others' faiths but

at the same time adopts dialogue to convey its differences on whatever points, makes love for God the *vis-a-tergo* of love for humankind and expresses this love through *seva* and such other philanthropic activities. The Sikh stress is on ethics of creative activism aiming at the realization of an ideal social structure of the Gurus' vision – a structure wherein love and equality prevail, the otherness of the other and human dignity are respected, and oppression is replaced by justice mingled with compassion. But the need of the hour is that we must not limit ourselves to words alone, rather we must try and put them into practice and live the idea in our practical social life.

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Chapter IV
PLURALISM AND SIKH TRADITION

I

Sikhism was born on the Indian soil and developed amidst the Indian culture. Thus, it received some impact of the contemporary religious and cultural life of the land. It accepted something, in terms of its terminology and some of its philosophical assumptions, from the earlier prevailing faiths and traditions, and is thus obliged to these theologies, both Indian and Semitic. But the question of indebtedness loses all relevance when we find that it was not a blind acceptance of the older theologies-in full or in part, but a critical reflection upon them coupled with the genius of its ten spiritual preceptors. In other words, we can say that Sikhism shares certain features with other religions then prevalent in India though at the same time it significantly differs from them in many respects. However, the question of indebtedness loses all relevance when the differences reach a stage where departure becomes irreversible.

In spite of all the affinities it has with other faiths in terms of its terminology and philosophical assumptions, Sikhism is a distinct individuality and precipitates a new *gestalt*. Guru Nanak envisioned the new faith to have a separate and distinct identity of its own and this is a fact which we find asserted from the very beginning in his pronouncements. This, of course, did not imply rancour or intolerance towards the other prevailing traditions, though it makes a constructive critique of how some of them were practised. It considers scriptures of all religions, Indian as well as Semitic, as true but strongly criticises those who fail to reflect on and follow them. The Sikh attitude towards other faiths,

as it can be ascertained from its tradition and theology, is that of tolerance and acceptance, of appreciation and peaceful co-existence. In fact, unlike many other prevailing religions, it went beyond sectarian considerations and embraced the entire humankind.

A distinct feature of the Sikh faith is that the Sikh social thought, the entire discipline that governs the Sikh way of life finds its roots in and derives its strength from its metaphysical doctrines, distinct as they were from those of the other religions which prevailed in India at that time. The very fact that the Sikh metaphysics serves as the *vis-a-tergo* of their social thought leads to the premise that Sikhism tries to maintain a balance between this-worldliness and the other-worldliness, between the spiritual/ sacred and the social/mundane. Implicit in this is also the concern of Sikh religion for human life in this world, to better the individual life and also transform the world as a whole into *Sach Khand* (or the abode of the Lord) by eradicating the evil and the demonic and make the good and the saintly prevail. It is in this context that Sikhism has also been called a way of life.

As we said in the preceding chapter, the central metaphysical doctrine of the Sikh faith is the unitary and dynamic nature of God. God is one, and this oneness of God is strongly emphasized in the Sikh scripture and tradition. The dynamic nature of God implies His creative aspect: He is the creator of the entire manifest phenomena. He not only creates (from Himself and out of His own volition) but also manifests Himself, *qua* Spirit, in the entire created phenomena. He is thus present in all beings and things and places throughout the universe(s). This lends spiritual character to the mundane social reality. We can also say that God's presence in the mundane reality spiritualizes the social, and at the same time and in an inverse order, it socializes the Spiritual as well. It is in this sense that Sikhism considers this mundane world and all that exists/inhabits herein as reality, though a relative reality. The

latter is real because it has the Divine particle manifesting in it but since it is not ever-lasting like the Real One, it is only a relative reality.

This view of Sikhism is unlike the thinking of the earlier Indian religious traditions which negated both the self and the world. They held that humankind as well as this manifest material phenomena was unreal. All this phenomenal world was, thus, called *mithia* or *maya*, and human was advised to free himself from the snare of this *maya* so as to raise himself up spiritually and achieve mystical communion with the Absolute. In other words, renouncing the world was declared a pre-condition for successfully treading the path of spiritual enlightenment. This justified the ascetic tendency among the *sramanic* traditions (Jainism and Buddhism) and also some sects among Hinduism. It is said that the Buddhist monks offered no resistance to the Mughal invaders and the consequent destruction of their monasteries "partly in obedience to their vows [to non-violence] and partly because they believed that astrological calculations had shown that the Muslims would in any case conquer Hindustan."[1] Hinduism used the idea of divine incarnation to rid transfer to the divine-incarnate the human responsibility to fight evil: a god will incarnate himself in human form and fight, on behalf of humankind, against the evil and demonic to make goodness prevail in human social situation.

On the other hand, Islam happened to be another major religion prevalent in India at the time when Sikhism originated and evolved. Unlike Hinduism which believed in polytheism and entirely unlike Jainism and Buddhism which are called by many as atheistic religions, Islam believed in the unity of God. Semitic in origin, Islam has been closer to Sikhism, though not identical with it in this respect. In the Islamic view, God is one and He is the creator of the manifest material world, but He remains transcendent and does not manifest himself in His creation. There is eternal duality between the Creator and the creation, thus denying the latter any spiritual unity with the Lord: the Spiritual does not get socialized

since the Divine is not perceived as manifesting in the material phenomena. Islam also provides a special status to Prophet Mohammad as God's messenger, thus stopping somewhat short of the idea of universal brotherhood of humankind as propounded in Sikhism.

Similarly, Christianity, another religion of Semitic origin, came to India from the west. No doubt, Christianity strongly believes in the unicity of God, but the doctrine of Trinity and Jesus being the Son of God happened to dilute the concept of unitary nature of God. In Christianity, the Word (divine revelation) becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus, thus making him the focus of the followers. The Christian mandate to preach the gospel to all the corners of the earth[2] associated it more intimately with the European expansionism and imperialism rather than with the masses either in India or in any other colonized country for that matter. Thus, Christianity, which suffered persecution in its earliest days, later allied itself with powerful Popes and Bishops and kings resulting in the mass enslavement of thousands of non-Christians in South America for not accepting the gospel and justifying their imperialistic designs all over the world as 'white man's burden'.

As we said earlier, unity and dynamism of God constitute the central metaphysical doctrine of the Sikh faith. The dynamism of God implies His creative aspect, the creation of the entire manifest phenomena, including the entire humankind. According to the Sikh metaphysics, God manifests himself, *qua* Spirit, in His creation, thus lending the latter its spiritual character. Both the material world and the human beings are the creations of God, created by Him out of His own self and out of His own will: they are not made of any extraneous material. In other words, we can also say that all created beings imply the manifestation, *qua* spirit, of God. The presence, in essence, of the same Divine in each being implies manifestation of the Real One in the manifest plurality. Guru Gobind Singh also says that God is one (*ek hai*) but He

manifests in many (*anek hai*) but this manifest plurality is latent in One (*phir ek hain)* and does not affect His oneness.[3] Guru Nanak in one of his hymns included in the Guru Granth Sahib had earlier said that the Lord-Creator prevails on the entire earth and sea; the Real One manifests Himself in a variety of forms, but still retains His unity.[4] Thus, the plurality of created beings is essentially one with the ultimate Reality, though the former does not constitute, either singly or collectively, the whole of Him. However, the *manmukh* is under the mistaken notion that the individual soul as well as the material world is an independent reality distinct from the Creator-Lord whereas the *gurmukh* possesses the insight into the real self and identifies it with God's self-revelation.

II

Plurality of religions and cultures in human history also implies division of human society into different religious and cultural groups. Added to this is the caste factor which makes hierarchical division of Indian society. Male domination against woman in the patriarchal society has also been an existential fact of our life. This situation applies to the entire world. In the Indian context, Sikhism inherited a society marked by sharp division on the basis of religion and caste, the position of woman being 'an irruption within an irruption'. Hinduism and Islam were the dominant religions then. Later on Christianity joined them, and now in certain pockets it enjoys a sizeable numerical strength. Sikhism is now a dominant religion in Punjab, with the Sikh scattering found almost everywhere in India and even abroad. Buddhists and Jains which happen to be numerically insignificant minorities are attempting a resurgence and making their presence felt. Added to these major religions can be seen a large variety of small sects or religious groups within as well as independent of these major traditions. The stronger the demarcations, the more bitterness in human social relations is the result.

The Sikh Gurus were not only conscious of this division in society but also spoke against it and took some concrete steps to do away with the evil of division of society on the basis of religion, caste, sex, etc. They tried to hit at the very roots of the problem by articulating the doctrine of the spiritual unity of human with God and then making it the *vis-a-tergo* of their social thought of the equality of humankind. As we said in the preceding chapter, the hymns of the Gurus, as included in the Guru Granth Sahib, make an emphatic statement to the effect that humankind is the spiritual manifestation of the Divine. Humanbeing is the sum total of an essentially divine life-force (soul) and the perishable body made of five elements. The former (which being divine is eternal) is housed in the latter (which having been made of five elements is perishable) and gives life to it. Thus, all humans are spiritually one with the Creator-Lord and ethnically equal among themselves and in his eye, one's creed, caste, class, family-name or gender notwithstanding.

Of course, there are apparent differences amongst human beings coming from different cultures and races, wearing different dresses depending upon their region or religion or culture, speak different languages, and have differences in the colour of their skin. All these differences of the exterior are the result of the differences in one's spatio-cultural background. Within this varied exterior lies the same essence, that is the same soul which is a Divine particle. No one among the entire humankind is better or worse, higher or lower than the other on the basis of birth: what makes one better or worse than the other is the kind of deeds one does during one's life in this world, one's religious or caste denomination notwithstanding. A scriptural hymn specifically saying that one may be very handsome, may belong to a high family, may be very rich or as knowledgeable as Brahma himself, but such a one is as good as dead if he has in his heart no love for

the Lord.[5] The best way to love God, so goes the Sikh message, is to love the humankind created by Him.[6]

This idea of essential human unity and equality is absolutely contrary to the prevalent Hindu view of inherent inequality among humankind. The latter view is that humankind is born of four different organs of Brahma. The 'Purusha-Sukta' hymn in the Rig Veda states that those who were born of Brahma's mouth came to be called Brahmins, those born of his arms were Kshatris, those born of his thighs were called Vaishayas and those who were born of his feet came to be called the Sudras. Thus, Hinduism believes inequality to be inherent in the creation of humankind, and the Brahmins, the highest among the four-fold division of the Hindu social order, used this Rig Vedic hymn as divine sanction for the hierarchical division of society. They emphasized this because this helped them perpetuate their elitist position and retain the status quo to exploit the Sudras and others for their vested interests. The Sudras have ever been declared and treated as inferior to people belonging to all other castes. They have been considered second-rate human beings, expected to serve the higher-caste people and denied all access to religious places, religious discourses and spiritual attainment.

Sikhism does not consider man superior or inferior, good or bad on the basis of religious affiliation, too. The very first words Guru Nanak uttered after having received the revelation were: there is no Hindu and there is no Muslim. Obviously, the Guru implied that each human being is divine in essence and this was more important than his religious denomination. But if we make a study of the socio-religious life of Guru Nanak's times, we shall find that the society was sharply divided between Hindus and Muslims and others in the name of religion. There was very little accommodation between them. In fact, an undercurrent of mistrust and hatred prevailed between these different faith-communities. The Muslims had a belief in the myth of superiority of their religion

and hated the '*kafirs*' and their belief in idolatry and polytheism. Similarly, the Hindus had no love for the Muslims whom they considered *malechh* who destroyed their places of worship and condemned their practices and rituals.

The saints of the Bhakti Movement were quite vocal in their opposition to the caste system. These saint-poets, many of whom came from the society's lower strata, composed hymns criticizing and condemning this discrimination against a part of humanity. Ravidas raises some crucial questions about the hierarchical social order and speaks of an ideal society where none are third or second–all are one. He says that the virtuous people are the best even if they come from the so-called low caste. Kabir revels especially in puncturing the Brahmin's pretensions to enlightenment and elitist status in society. To him one does not become a Brahmin by mere birth in a particular family, but one who reflects on Brahman is called a true Brahmin. They also came up with their ideology of one God. They relegated to the background the Brahminical deities with their discriminatory rites and rituals, and replaced them with the *nirankar/nirgun* God who was spiritually manifest in each human being. Their God was not to be found in the mosques or temples, rather He was to be perceived within each self. Ravidas, in his hymns included in the scripture, also uses for God the terms 'deliverer of the poor', 'uplifter of the lowly' and 'purifier of the defiled' which reflect His concern for the weak and the marginalized in society.

This view of the Sikh Gurus was rather revolutionary as against the prevalent orthodox Hindu view. Following the earlier example of *Manusmriti*, Tulsidas, a Hindu poet of medieval India and author of *Ram Chrit Manas*, says that 'a *brahmin* must be honoured though devoid of every virtue and learning.' This kind of thinking produced pride and contempt among the Brahmins and a feeling of inferiority and undesirable servility among the other mass of humans, especially the so-called Sudras and

outcastes. This is also contrary to the Western Christian view referring to which a theologian says: "The orient until now has been approached by the West chiefly on two levels-a religious level on which the official Christian view has been that the beliefs and values of the Orient are wrong, and a second level in which the official view has been, and remains so till today, that their beliefs and values do not matter."[7] As against this, we have in the distant past the example of Markandeya, a so-called untouchable, who rose to be a holy sage not because of his caste but because of his deeds of piety. Nearer at hand are the examples of Kabir (weaver), Ravidas (cobbler) and Namdev (calico-printer) who achieved enlightenment, notwithstanding their birth in the so-called lower castes.

Economic disparities between individuals and nations have always been there. The Bible also refers to this universal fact of human existential social situation. It says: There will never be any poor among you if only you will obey the Lord (Deut. 15:4) but the poor will never cease out of the land (verse 11). The above two Christian statements reflect the scriptural ideal and the reality of our social situation. If we remember God, we shall also remember that all humans are His children and all of them must be treated as equal inheritors of God's wealth. Unfortunately, humans fail to remember God, and thus commit sin by disobeying His dictum. In consequence of this sin, humanity or at least a major part of humanity suffers in the never-ceasing poverty resulting therefrom. It becomes all religions to make man remember God, avoid this sin and thus bring about happiness for himself as well as for others.

The Sikh doctrine strongly favours the spiritual unity and equality of humankind. The Gurus articulated this doctrine and expressed it in their hymns as included in the Guru Granth Sahib. No ideology, however good or commendable, is of any use if it is not put into practice. Sikhism favours an overall development of

man-from within (spiritual) as well as from without (social, i.e. moral and ethical). That is why Guru Nanak says that Truth, no doubt, is the highest, but higher still is truthful living. Realization of Truth is a noble ideal on the spiritual side of life, but truthful living, which includes the bahvioural patterns of man in his social intercourse, is declared nobler on the ethical side.[8] The best religion, according to the Sikh scripture, is one which makes man remember God as well as perform noble deeds. There is another hymn in the scripture which makes an emphatic statement that man ought to work with his own hands (to make his livelihood) and at the same time concentrate his mind on the name of the Lord.[9] This clearly brings out the Sikh emphasis on embedding human spiritual life in society because that is the only way of raising the moral and ethical standards of humanity.

The Gurus set up several institutions to put into practice what they professed in their utterances and forge a feeling of equality and fellowship among people of different creeds and castes. The first institution set up by the founder of the faith, Guru Nanak, was *sangat* or congregation of the devotees. The Sikh canonical literature defines *sangat* as a gathering of holy people engaged in the remembrance and laudation of the Divine.[10] Sikhism believes in the oneness of the Absolute, and anybody could join the *sangat* in *nam simran* or remembrance of Name Divine. Guru Nanak set up *dharamsalas* or meeting-places for the *sangat* at several places during his preaching odysseys, but the *dharamsala* at Kartarpur, where Guru Nanak settled down after his preaching tours and spent the last years of his life, was the first which was run under the personal care of the Guru. There was no restriction whatsoever in joining the *sangat*, and all those who joined it would sit along side others without any favour or prejudice against anybody on the basis of creed or caste. This was the first step to bring people belonging to different groups

together on one platform. This *dharamsala* later on got the new nomenclature of *gurdwara* as we know it today.[11]

Another institution which was added to the *dharamsala* was *langar*, also known as *pangat*: the term *langar* is used for the building as well as for the food served there. Apparently, it seems the institution of *langar* was started with a view to providing food to the needy and to anybody visiting the *dharamsala/gurdwara*. However, it had a more significant meaning and role as well. Here the food is prepared communally; anybody coming from any religion or caste or class can put in physical labour in the preparation of the food. Anybody, of his own free will, can make donations towards meeting expenses in this regard. Of course, there is no binding on anybody visiting the *gurdwara* and taking food in the *langar*. No distinctions whatever are made in the sitting arrangements or in providing food to those desirous of taking it. During the Guru-period when caste system was very strong in India, the Gurus made it obligatory for all, the prince or the peasant, to partake of food in the *langar* before seeing the Guru.[12] The objective obviously was to create a feeling of equality and fellowship among all people of different creeds and castes. Even outside India, *langar* is an integral part of each *gurdwara*, and one can come across people from various non-Sikh religions partaking of food there.

Besides caste which is peculiar to Indian society, economic disparity is another equally responsible factor for stratification of society into different classes all over the world. In such a set-up, the affluent and the haves generally adopt an oppressive and exploitative attitude towards the poor and the have-nots: this is equally true in the case of individuals as well as nations. This gulf between the two classes (of individuals and nations) widens further as a result of the pace of social, material progress being different for these different classes. Since economic factor comes to determine human social relations, one generally becomes unduly

more unmindful of moral and ethical values in the struggle for economic betterment so as to raise one's social status. Sikhism, however, believes in the universal brotherhood of humankind, and therefore holds everyone a rightful and equal claimant to the natural resources provided by the universal Father. Any attempt to deny one's share in that heritage would amount to committing a sacrilege against God. The ethics of the kingdom of God as taught in the Sikh scripture are the ethics of a classless society. There is no denying the fact that peace and harmony among different classes and castes and ethnicities depends on how far we succeed in reducing the economic disparities between individuals and nations.

An important socio-religious directive for the Sikhs is to earmark tithe or one-tenth of their income for philanthropic purposes, for projects of common weal. Also, every Sikh, while visiting a *gurdwara* to pay obeisance to the Guru Granth Sahib, generally makes an offering in cash or kind. There is no lower or higher limit on this offer and, in fact, it is not even obligatory if one is not in a position or otherwise does not intend to offer any. This offer of cash is generally made with religious faithfulness though this is not to please the Guru or God: it is an individual's modest contribution made voluntarily towards general, communal purposes. In Sikh tradition we see that all communal ventures are completed with the joint effort of the community-each contributing according to his/her might. History stands witness to the fact that Guru Arjan declined Emperor Akbar's offer of a *jagir* to run langar at the Harimandar in Amritsar.[13] The Guru's idea was that institutions like *langar* should instead be run with the help of small donations voluntarily made by the common Sikhs. The latter option gives all a sense of participation in the ventures of common weal.

This question of equality in Sikhism is all-inclusive- inclusive of all humankind, including womankind and people of all religious denominations. Woman in medieval India when Sikhism originated lived quite an unenviable life. She was considered inferior to her

male counterpart and Manu even called her man's footwear. Her place was confined to the four walls of the house, and she had little social and religious rights. She had no entity of her own, and was dependent on her father and brother(s) before marriage and on her husband after marriage. The fact that she had no entity of her own was also responsible for making her commit *sati* on the pyre of her husband. A woman belonging to the so-called Sudra caste suffered from double oppression - a kind of irruption within an irruption: she suffered as a woman and also as a member of the economically poor or socially lower caste family. Female infanticide, child marriage, malnutrition and *sati* were some of the evils resulting from this *weltanschauuang*. In fact, it was not in India alone, even the so-called progressive and developed West then called her "the other name of frailty".

It was in this social scenario that Guru Nanak took up the woman's cause and gave the revolutionary idea of considering her equal with man having born of the same Divine source and having within her the same Divine spark. The Sikh Gurus tried to do away with the sexist discrimination and oppression against her, and provide her an independent personality of her own. Sikhism makes no distinction between man and woman, and considers both as the equal manifestation of the Divine. Both of them are equal but distinct because of the functional distinction they have in the biological sense. Notwithstanding the fact that none of the Gurus happened to be a woman, woman in Sikh metaphysics and tradition enjoys an equal place with man. Guru Nanak was perhaps the first personage in the religious history of humankind to raise his voice against her discrimination. She has been called the mother of humankind: all great human beings, including kings and saints, are born of her, and it is only God who is not born of her. Sikhism not only gave this precept but also took several concrete steps to eradicate the evils like female infanticide, *sati*, etc. which had resulted from man's discriminatory

attitude toward her. The normative principles guiding the conduct and social behaviour in the Khalsa Panth strictly prohibit female infanticide and adultery. The severe chastisement of the killing of female child, a practice prevalent in medieval India, is a vivid example of the respect paid to the female sex and to the moral norm of 'reverence for life'. The *kurimar* (killer of the female infant) has been declared a fallen Sikh,[14] and no social relations are to be maintained with such people. Everybody has a right to live and every being is obliged to ensure that right to everybody else. There are many other references in the *Rahitnamas,* or the code of Sikh conduct, denouncing adultery and recommending chastity and fidelity as important constituents of the sanctity of familial and societal relations. These requirements of chastity and fidelity are not applied to women alone: on the other hand, this is made obligatory for men also. Even the kings were to practice these values.[15] In fact, the Sikh rejection of asceticism in favour of a householder's life is also a way of providing woman a place of respect in family and social life.

As we said, the Sikh Gurus not only provided ideational basis in their hymns for the socio-religious rehabilitation of women but also undertook and advised to undertake some widespread and practical steps in this direction. As a result of this, she came to occupy a place equal to her male counterpart and play an active role in the socio-religious life of the community. Ever since the origin of Sikhism, a Sikh woman can perform all those religious responsibilities which a male Sikh can. That the women were quite active as missionaries of Sikh faith during the Guru-period is confirmed by a *hukumnama* issued by Guru Tegh Bahadur to the *sangat* of Patna wherein he refers among others to one Bebe Peri Bai.[16] There is also the example of Mai Bhago who played a commendable role during the pontificate of Guru Gobind Singh. It is said that about forty Sikhs, unable to bear the hunger and other hardships in the fort at Anandpur besieged by the imperial

army and forces of Rajput hill chiefs, deserted the Guru after having written, on the Guru's asking, a letter disowning the Guru. As they reached their homes in the Majha region of the Punjab, their womenfolk chided them for having left the battle-field. They now decided to make up for their lapse and returned to the Guru under the leadership of Mai Bhago. She fought along with other Sikhs against the Mughal forces in the battle of Muktsar, and thereafter accompanied the Guru to the south where she spent the last years of her life.

Sikh tradition, supported by the *Rahitnama* literature, lays injunctions against female infanticide, *purdah* and *sati*. It also permits widow re-marriage for her rehabilitation in social life. The *Rahitnamas* denounce any kind of marginalization of woman. Chastity and fidelity, two important constituents of the sanctity of family life as well as of social relations, are no more the virtues expected of woman alone: they apply to women as much as they apply to men and even to the rulers. Although this realization for emancipation of woman had dawned in the wake of the Bhakti movement yet it goes to the credit of the Sikh Gurus that they supplemented the ideational basis with some concrete steps for the rehabilitation of woman in society.

The division of humankind into different races and religious traditions is not considered material in the Sikh scheme of things. All human beings, irrespective of the race or faith they belong to, are considered equal. Guru Gobind Singh makes reference to several races and nationalities[17] including the Aryan, Dravadian, the Mongol, the European, etc., and says that the same Divine light manifests in them all, thereby implying that all of them are spiritually one and ethnically equal. Even all religions of the world are accepted and appreciated, though Sikhism does criticize certain practices in some of them which, it considers, go against human equality and dignity and hinder eco-human welfare. The Sikh scripture makes a very clear statement saying that one must not

say any of the scriptures of Indian or of Semitic faiths as false, rather false are those persons who do not reflect on them and follow them.[18] God is one, and He is not confined to the limits of either a temple or a mosque, either in the easterly or in the westerly direction alone.[19] The same divine spark pervades both the Hindus and the Muslims, in fact the entire humankind belonging to different religious denominations, thus making them equal in His eye as well as among themselves. God of the Sikh perception pervades all notwithstanding one's caste or creedal persuasions. Implicitly, God is against the hierarchical order or division of humankind, rather He favours equality and love amongst all.

Obviously, religion is another very potent factor, besides caste and class, which divides humankind into diverse groups. At the time Sikhism was born and during the period of its ascendancy, persecution of a part of human population in the name of religion was quite common. History stands witness to numerous instances of the Muslim rulers using religion to oppress and persecute those who believed in a religion other than their own. The Sikh Gurus felt that such discrimination or persecution was an insult to the divine essence since it accepts all human beings essentially one. Guru Gobind Singh, in one of his compositions, refers to the diversity of religions followed by people of the world, and declares emphatically that followers of all these diverse religions are one - *manas ki jat sabai ekai pahichanbo*.[20] Religious labels are temporary and wither away with the bodily vesture whereas it is the worth of deeds done by man that is the criterion of judgment both in this world and the Divine Court. The role of religion is not like that of a pair of scissors that tears asunder but like that of a needle that sews together: religion is not supposed to divide mankind, rather it has to bring the entire humanity together in one brotherhood. Bhai Gurdas makes a very pertinent comment as he says that the role of religion is like that of a needle to sew

together the fabric of society, and not like that of scissors to tear it asunder.[21]

Sikhism is for negating the idea of exclusivism and inclusivism, rather it accepts the fact of plurality of religions, their prophets and scriptures. The exclusivists generally do so by comparing the ideal of one's own faith with the practices of others. The Sikh view is what the twentieth century American poet and mystic, Walt Whitman, implies when he accepts "a hundred, a thousand other Saviours and mediators and Bibles." When we study the life of Guru Nanak, we come across several instances indicating his support for pluralism. There is in the Janamsakhis an episode relating to Guru Nanak's visit to Multan during one of the preaching odysseys he undertook after having received revelation. Multan being an important religious centre those days was said to have holy persons of various religious traditions residing there. When Guru Nanak visited there, he was received by the holy men residing there. They met the Guru with a bowl filled to the brim with milk, implying thereby that the place already had all the religious traditions represented there an that there was no place for a new one.[22] Guru Nanak is said to have placed a flower petal on the milk. Bhai Gurdas also refers to the incident in his *Vars* and explains it by saying that the Guru might mix up with other holy men as the water of the Ganga mingles with sea-water.[23] The Guru also might have wished to indicate that his faith though distinct is not an attempt to replace any, but will co-exist with others. This kind of attitude helps us understand and appreciate other religions and live in harmony with other faith-communities. This attitude is reflected in all Sikh professions and practices.

There are several instances in the Sikh tradition where we find the Sikh Gurus advising their followers to give equal regard to the prophets and seers from all traditions. Sikhs must also not look down upon those who have a different form of worship. Such an attitude in the late medieval times was much ahead of the

times and can very easily be taken as a precursor to the modern-day pluralistic model. The oft-quoted example in this regard is that of Guru Arjan who was once visited by Bhai Gopi and some other Sikhs who, as they told the Guru, felt confused by the diverse incarnations in which God was worshipped. The Guru advised them: "All forms and attributes are God's, yet He transcends them. You should, therefore, worship only the Absolute One. At the same time, you must abjure rancor towards those who have a different way of worship."[24]

It will be pertinent to refer here to two instances from the life of Guru Nanak and Guru Hargobind. Bhai Mardana, a Muslim by birth, was a life-long companion of Guru Nanak. He accompanied the Guru on all of his preaching odysseys. Although Mardana ws very close to the Guru yet he never asked him (Mardana) to formally convert to his way. When the Guru saw the end of Mardana near, he asked him to specify the way his body should be disposed off. Guru Hargobind who got Sri Hargobindpur developed is said to have got a mosque constructed along side other places of worship in the new township. These and several such other instances speak well of the Gurus respect for other faiths.

The Sikh tradition also believes in the Word as contained in the Guru Granth Sahib as their Guru Eternal. As we discussed in the preceding chapter, the Guru Granth Sahib comprises hymns of six of the ten Sikh Gurus as well as those of certain holy persons coming from both the Hindu and the Muslim traditions. All the hymns included in the scripture have together been given the name of Word, or revealed Word, and it is this Word which has been given the status of the Guru. All the hymns, irrespective of its authorship, are today given the same respect by the devotees. This implies that revelation is not the monopoly of any particular religion, caste or individual. Anybody from any religion or caste or region can be blessed with enlightenment and thus be mystically

one with the Absolute. This acceptance is unique to the Sikh tradition, and is a huge step towards religious pluralism.

Lest this acceptance of the plurality of faiths should remain an abstract idea, the Sikh Gurus wanted different faiths and faith-communities to interact with one another. A dialogue between different faiths is not only recommended, but an example is also set to hold dialogue especially with people of other faiths and thereby try to arrive at the truth.[25] If we have a glance at the history of religions, we shall see that perhaps Guru Nanak was the first spiritual preceptor who initiated interfaith dialogue. After Guru Nanak received the revelation, he took on preaching odysseys in different directions to share this divine message with the people at large. During these odysseys, he traveled throughout India and even outside. He went up to Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka in the south, up to Orissa, Assam and Bangladesh in the East, up to Baghdad and Mecca in the West and deep into the Himalayas in the north.[27] He seems to have made it a point to visit any place of pilgrimage or importance to both Hindus and Muslims. At such places, he would call on the holy men who might be living there and have a spiritual discourse with them. Instead of thrusting his view of truth on anyone of them, he would listen to them and also share with them the revelation he had had. The Sikh tradition does not support polemic but instead recommends a meaningful and constructive dialogue in which one must listen to the other's viewpoint and then offer one's own. Such a dialogical relationship with other faiths leads to a much-needed deeper understanding and appreciation of other religions.

The notions of listening to the others' viewpoint (*kichhu suniai*) and putting forward your own viewpoint (*kichhu kahiai*) clearly urge fruitful dialogue aimed at searching for the truth. The idea of first listening to the other implies an open mind and the capacity to listen to/tolerate the other's point of view. This is necessary to have a fruitful dialogue. The Sikh scripture categorically

rejects polemics, insisting, rather, that only after polemics have been set aside can the real search for truth begin and bear fruit."[27] Polemics and argumentation cause- and are also caused by–the ego which in the Sikh scripture is referred to as a 'serious malady, but humility, one of the prerequisites for genuine listening to another, is the essence of all virtues. Thus, Sikh scripture clearly teaches that we are to cultivate humility, sharing our own views while we listen to the views of others, for only then can we all progress on the path to truth.

The vision of religious tolerance and the affirmation of religious plurality are found aptly embodied in the lives of the Gurus and in Sikh tradition in general. This is evident in the way Guru Nanak was revered not just by Sikhs but also by Hindus and Muslims. Some of the Hindu and Muslim holy men whom he visited and had dialogue with had deep regard for him.[28] When Mohisin Fani says that Guru Nanak "carried the rosary of the Muslims in his hand and the sacred thread of the Hindus on his body" he means to indicate that the Guru revered both the religions yet transcended all.[29] Mushir-ul-Haq says that "among all the non-Muslim religious personalities born in India, Guru Nanak was perhaps the only one whom the Muslims regarded as one of them."[30] For example, he went to Mecca, the most sacred place for the Muslims, not to show any disrespect to Muslim or hurt their sensibilities but to point out the futility of some of their beliefs and practices: Divine presence is not confined alone to Ka'aba in Mecca, but God is present everywhere, in all directions. Guru Nanak went to Puri and his satire at the way the priests offered *arti* to the deity there was aimed at telling them that God was not confined to any of the deities, rather he was present everywhere in the created phenomena and that the nature is ever offering *arti* to Him. It is also said that when Guru Nanak breathed his last, his Hindu and Muslim admirers both wanted to dispose off his body as per their own rites.

Guru Arjan was recognized by Emperor Jahangir for the way his message and conduct brought Hindus and Muslims together to seek spiritual solace with him. Reference to the Guru in his autobiographical *Tuzk* is an ample proof of the fact that many Hindus and Muslims revered his piety and spirituality and flocked to him to seek his blessings. However, under the influence of his orthodox theocratic advisers, he does not take this development positively. He says :

> So many of the simple-minded Hindus, nay, many foolish Muslims too had been fascinated by the Guru's ways and teaching. For many years the thought had been presenting itself to my mind that either I should put an end to this false traffic or that he be brought into the fold of Islam.[31]

It is another thing that the Emperor, under the influence of his intolerant and bigot religious advisers, felt rather bad at the knowledge that such a pious and enlightened person belonged to a religion other than Islam. He wanted that the Guru be brought into the fold of Islam. This attitude of the emperor was exclusivistic. The Guru was given the choice between Islam and death. The Tuzk says: "I fully knew of his heresies, and I ordered that he should be brought into my presence, that his property be confiscated and that he should be put to death with torture."[32] Since Sikhism strongly believes in the freedom of conscience, the Guru preferred death to giving up faith under coercion. Thus, Guru Arjan became the first martyr to lay down his life for the sake of man's religious freedom–a fundamental of religious pluralism.

Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675), the ninth Guru of the Sikh faith, became the second martyr of the Sikh faith when he, as says his son and successor Guru Gobind Singh, "broke the pitcher of body at the threshold of the Delhi ruler" so that everybody should be free to practice the religion of his or her choice. This time the emperor in Delhi happened to be Aurangzib. A pious man in his personal life, Aurangzib was an orthodox Muslim who had

waded through a river of blood to reach the throne: he had to imprison his father and kill his brothers to get the crown. He followed a fanatical religious policy to appease and please the Muslim orthodoxy. He decreed "to destroy with a willing hand the schools and temples of the infidels and put an entire stop to their religious practices and teachings" (1669) and imposed *jizya,* a tax non-Muslim population had to pay for permission to live in an Islamic State (1679). There were many more such edicts which aimed at humiliating the non-Muslims. Though Aurangzib had nothing personal against Guru Tegh Bahadur, yet both of them stood clearly for ideals in stark opposition to each other. Guru Tegh Bahadur could not bear the persecution of others and he made up his mind to resist the Emperor's policy of religious intolerance and persecution and even to lay down his life to redeem the freedom of belief.

The decisive moment came in 1675: he responded to a request by the Kashmiri *pandits* who had come to him to complain against Iftikhar Khan, Aurangzeb's satrap in Kashmir, who was making *en masse* conversions to Islam through use of force. The Guru listened to their woes and resolved to take upon himself the onus of defending their right to religious practice and belief. He advised them to tell the authority in Delhi that if the Guru was converted, they would all voluntarily accept Islam. Resolved to challenge the royal policy of religious exclusivism and intolerance, the Guru of his own set out for Delhi. Although the Guru was himself leading to Delhi, the authorities arrested him on the way, put him in chains and brought him to Delhi. His refusal to renounce his faith resulted in his public execution in Chandni Chowk on 11 November 1675. However, before beheading of the Guru, three of his devoted followers were also tortured to death before his eyes.

The resolution by the Guru to court martyrdom was deliberate and conscious, and he took this decision of his own. The authorities intervened only after he took up the challenge to

undo both the evil as evil and the suffering of evil as such: the authorities felt his teachings were strengthening among people the resolve, the determination to suffer hardship and even death rather than give up their faith under coercion. It was a peculiar situation of self-prompted and meaningful suffering for the sake of others but to uphold a cherished ideal. The religious history of mankind provides no second example of a spiritual leader laying down his life for the people belonging to a religious tradition other than his own. In the Indian history and folklore, he has always been remembered as the protector of dharma and also protector of the Hindu faith- a unique example of its kind in the history of mankind. Interestingly, there are several Sikh scriptural hymns criticizing the Hindu religious symbols of *janeu* and *tilak* which the Brahmanical class had begun to consider as an end in themselves, thus giving precedence to form over the spirit of religion. In this case, the Guru laid down his life not as much to save these symbols of Hinduism as to save freedom of belief and practice for everyone. The Guru's move was certainly not against the Muslims, and in fact had the contemporary political situation in India been the other way round, Guru Tegh Bahadur would surely have made the same sacrifice for the sake of Muslims' religious freedom, for the rights of others.

As we said earlier, Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, had established many *sangats* (congregations) and *dharamsalas* (meeting place for the *sangat*). The succeeding Gurus tried to consolidate these congregations, and instituted the institution of *manjis* and *melis* to preach the Gurus' message and to liaise with the congregations in far off places. The Masand institution worked well for some time but gradually many of the *masands* became corrupt and deviated from the Gurus' word. The creation of the Khalsa Panth by Guru Gobind Singh on the Vaisakhi day (30 March) of AD 1699 has been the fulfillment of Guru Nanak's mission. The latter had said in one of his hymns that

those desirous of treading this path of truth/love should be ready to give away their heads. Guru Gobind Singh on this day practically asked for five persons to come ahead to give away their heads for the sake of truth or righteousness. From amongst the stunned assembly, the five who got up in response to the call given by the Guru are known as Panj Piare or the Five Beloved Ones in the Sikh tradition. The Guru administered the *amrit* of the double-edged sword and gave the surname of 'Singh' to each one of them. Thereafter he himself sought the *amrit* from them and himself also added the surname of 'Singh'.

The creation of the Khalsa was in fulfillment of the assignment given to the Guru by God Himself.[32] The Khalsa was created as an order of the saint-soldiers who would lead a spiritually pious and enlightened and socially responsible and righteous life. This was in fulfillment of Guru Nanak's mission and in furtherance of Guru Hargobind's concept of *miri-piri*. They were to be ever in mystical communion with God and they were never indifferent to affairs of the world. Rather this mystical communion transformed them into morally and ethically uplifted and socially awakened individuals who strove, even sacrificed themselves for the sake of equality and justice, righteousness and self-respect. In fact, the Guru's demand for the heads on the occasion symbolized the change in their mental make-up. The recipients of the *amrit* were no cowards and were ever ready to stand up against evil for the sake of righteousness.

This also gave the constituents of the Khalsa Panth a shared identity and a common surname. This shared identity in form served as a means to the higher end of moral living. Maintenance of the form without observing the moral code is like demeaning the symbols. Just as a Brahman without knowledge is graceless and a horse without celerity is worthless, similarly these outer symbols are of no value if they are not externalizations of the inner virtues of the wearer, says Bhai Daya Singh in his *Rahitnama*.

The criticism of *janeu* (the sacred thread for the Hindus) in the Sikh writings can also be understood in this context. Thus, among the constituents of the Khalsa Brotherhood, the maintenance of this shared form is symbolic of the inner discipline and values encouraged and cultivated by the wearer of these symbols. These external symbols are not mere formalism, rather the Guru has invested them with the metaphorical expression of the inner qualities of the soul to stand for righteousness (*dharma*). These qualities include a sense of equality, a feeling of fellowship with and love for the entire humankind.

The creation of Khalsa meant two immediate doctrinal developments. One, the Khalsa was now united direct with the Guru and, since Guru in Sikhism has been equated with the Real One, with God Himself. The dissolution of the institution of *masand* and then of the personal guruship conveyed an obvious meaning. It was not only the Gurus' Khalsa but Wahiguru's Khalsa as well. The Sikh salutation also implies that 'the Khalsa belongs to Wahiguru and all the exploits of the Khalsa are in reality the victories of God'. Second, the Khalsa observed egalitarianism, both *inter se* and also with the Guru himself. Thus, the Khalsa Panth which became equal to the Guru during the latter's lifetime came to represent the person of the Guru thereafter. They sought guidance from the Word, as contained in the scripture. All members of the Khalsa Brotherhood are to imbibe the spirit of the scriptural teachings and to bear the added responsibility of socializing the spiritual precepts and work for the realization of the Guru's vision. In other words, the Khalsa as an individual has to cultivate virtues from the revealed Word and then extend them to the social life.

The social involvement of the individual Khalsa is two-dimensional. One, he has to acquire all the humanly realizable attributes of the Real One and become essentially like Him. He finds no distinction between man and man on any grounds whatsoever. Love for fellow beings is the best way to express

love for God: love for the remotest (God being transcendent is the farthest of all–*sabhan te dur*) can be expressed only through love for the nearest. Khalsa is not a parasitic ascetic: the normative Khalsa discipline teaches him to hold the fruit of his honest labour as common possession. This dictum is seen practiced in the institution of *langar* and the general Sikh way of life wherein *kirat karma* (doing honest labour) and *wand chhakna* (sharing with others the fruit of your labour), alongside *nam japna* (remembrance of Name Divine) are the essential ingredients. Two, the Khalsa has to fight against and annihilate all those traits and tendencies which serve as antidote to the cultivation of above ethical values. The Khalsa not only imbibes these values in his personal life but also extends them in society. This transforms the Khalsa into a pluralist who treats all irespecive of one's creed or caste or race, as equals.

Among the Sikhs, Bhai Kanahaiya is the best example of a Sikh seeing the same divine essence behind different religious denominations of the wounded soldiers in the battlefield at Anandpur. The chronicles relate how he would offer water to all the wounded soldiers, making no distinction between friend and foe: he saw the same divine light reflected in each face. When somebody complained to Guru Gobind Singh against this behaviour of Bhai Kanahaiya, the Guru is said to have not only commended him but also gave him medicinal balm to put on the wounds of all the soldiers. Treating all human beings as spiritually one and ethnically equal notwithstanding their different religious, cultural or racial backgrounds is one of the fundamentals of Sikh metaphysics, and this also happens to be the pre-requisite for maintaining harmonious relationship between faith-communities.

Sikhism, no doubt, accepts plurality, but this acceptance is not passive; it is, rather, critical. The Sikh Gurus are highly critical of any religion or religious practices that sanction and safeguard hierarchical division of social structures. They reject the idea of

inequality by birth among people. All humans are equal, no matter how different they may appear externally. All humans are, in essence, one with, and before, God, and that makes them equal among themselves. In one of his hymns, Guru Nanak sides himself with the lowliest among the lowly and also states these so-called low and the poor are God's favourites. The Gurus used religion to do away the evils of injustices, oppression and exploitation and rather used it as an instrument for social change.

During the post-Guru period also, we find that the Sikhs have always stood by the principle of religious pluralism. The first half of the eighteenth century was a period of severe persecution for the Sikhs. They found themselves sandwitched between the Afghan invaders and Muslim rulers. They were hounded out of their homes and prices were fixed on their heads. However, when they gained political power during the latter half of the 18th century, the Sikh chiefs nurtured no feelings of revenge against the Muslims as such. Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the most powerful among the Sikh chiefs of the day, had many non-Sikhs holding high positions in his court and army. They included Hindus, Muslims and Christians. People of all religions felt free to practice their own faiths, and no discrimination was made against anybody on the basis of religion.

This attitude of acceptance, of equality of all can be seen even in modern times. A brief comment on an event of early 20th century would do. In 1920s, there was an agitation by the low-castes in Kerala against the royal decree banning their movement on the roads leading to the temple. These low caste people decided to embrace Sikhism because it rejected casteism. In 1936, Master Tara Singh visited there to extend them moral help. His speech quoted in several local newspapers says in clear terms that the Sikhs will support their cause but do not want them to convert because of this. Of course, they can embrace Sikhism if they

otherwise feel like it. And, we know several hundred of them beame Sikhs, known as Ezhva Sikhs.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism*, 107
2. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit": Matthew, 28:19
3. Guru Gobind Singh, *Jap*, 43
4. Guru Granth Sahib, V, 296
5. *Ibid.*, V, 253
6. *Ibid.*, V, 266
7. W.C. Smith, *Patterns of Faith Around the World*, 114
8. Guru Granth Sahib, I, 62
9. *Ibid.*, Kabir, 1375
10. *Ibid.*, I, 72
11. Gurmukh Singh, *Historical Sikh Shrines*, 27
12. Sikh chronicles record that once Emperor Akbar called on Guru Amar Das at Goindwal but the Guru conveyed to the Emperor that he can see the Guru only after having meals in the *langar*. This single instance is enough to suggest that *langar* was an institution aimed at creating a feeling of equality and fellowship among all, including the princes and peasants: anybody desirous of meeting the Guru must accept this principle. The *Mahima Prakash* also records that the Emperor refused to step on the silk spread out for him by his servants, rather he preferred to walk bare foot to the Guru. Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama*, a contemporary document, also records of Akbar's visit to Guru Arjan on 24 November 1598.
13. Emperor Akbar is said to have made this offer to Guru Amar Das (cf. *Gurpratap Suraj Granth*) but the Guru refused. See Guru Dharam Singh, *Guru Ram Das in Sikh Tradition*, 24-25.
14. *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, 23
15. "Daya Singh Rahitnama" in *Rahitname*, 63

16. Ganda Singh, Ed., *Hukamname*, 15
17. Guru Gobind Singh, *Akal Ustati*, 254-55
18. Guru Granth Sahib, Kabir, 1350
19. *Ibid.*
20. Guru Gobind Singh, *Akal Ustati*, 85-86
21. Bhai Gurdas, *Varan*, XXX.4
22. The incident is mentioned in more than one Janamsakhi accounts. For an analysis of the Guru's visit to Multan, see Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition: An Analytical Analysis*, 181-84. The *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* refers to one such instance relating to Shaikh Abdul Qadiri Gilani, a Sufi saint of the Qadiri tradition.
23. Bhai Gurdas, *Varan*, I.44
24. The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism, II, 104
25. Guru Granth Sahib, I, 661
26. For details of the preaching odysseys and their analysis, see Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition: An Analytical Study*
27. Guru Granth Sahib, I, 1255
28. During his preaching odysseys, Guru Nanak visited various places sacred to both Hindus and Muslims. At these towns/places the Guru met various Muslim leaders such as Mian Mittha (on way from Sialkot to Talwandi), Shaikh Ibrahim at Pakpattan, Baha-ud-din Makhdum at Multan, Pir Dastgir of Baghdad. At all these places, the Guru had a very amiable and meaningful dialogue with these people, listened to them and put forth his own point of view.
29. Mohisin Fani, "Dabstan-i-Mazahis" as quoted by Mushiral Haq, "Muslim Attitude Towards Guru Nanak" in Harbans Singh, ed., *Perspectives on Guru Nanak*, 294
30. *Ibid.*, 295
31. Henry Beveridge, Tr., *The Tuzk-i-Jahangiri*,
32. *Ibid.*
33. See Satinam Singh, *Bande ton Rab*. It is a sacred text of the Dera Sacha Sauda.

CONCLUSION

The infotech revolution and development of fast means of transportation during the past hundred years or so have transformed this wide big world into a small global village. As a result, people with different cultural, religious and racial backgrounds are now our next-door neighbors. Different faith-communities inter-penetrate and inter-act with one another. Gone are the days when people belonging to such different denominations lived in their own tiny, isolated camps, blissfully ignorant of whoever existed or whatever happened outside their camp.

Unfortunately, however, in today's pluralistic 'global village', each faith-community is not in harmonious relationship with the other. This has been due mainly to the fact that each religious community tends to underrate the ideology and culture of the other. And this usually stems from the way leaders of each religion claim a monopoly of truth for their faith. To them, only their religion, or only their prophet, can lead people on the path to God-realization and self-realization. Other religions are taken as fake or inauthentic, and other faith-communities as pagans. This exclusivist attitude is doing much damage to our social fabric; religious people and their leaders have the responsibility to address and try to rectify this problem. We must realize that "the religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism.... This is true for all of us."

In today's pluralistic set-up, we need to recognize the value and validity of multiple religious communities in society. That is the only way to enable different faith communities live harmoniously and peacefully. Diverse religions of the world are finite manifestations of one Infinite. This in no way diminishes

the significance of any particular religion; rather, such diversity reveals the richness of eternal and infinite truth. Each religion presents visions of God, world, and humanity from a localized, historically particular perspective. God is infinite and all religious experiences of Him are finite.

The need of the day is to try to understand and appreciate the religious beliefs and practices of one's neighbour. One cannot put one's faith in parenthesis while trying to understand and examine the faith of the other; and yet, one must listen attentively to the faith of the other as this is witnessed to by the believer, without pre-judging that faith and without abandoning one's own commitment. Also, this does not mean confining our knowledge to the religious systems and doctrines of others. This would mean trying to confront a religious truth in the abstract. We must make an endeavour to know and appreciate the historical-cultural context and the people themselves who make up other faith-communities. We can lead a meaningful, satisfying and safe life only if we do so and also work out a more dialogical relationship with our neighbours who may not necessarily be of our own race or color or religious persuasion. We must not only live with our religiously and culturally diverse neighbours; we must also talk with, work with, and learn from them.

In such a scenario, it becomes relevant to analyse the role of religion in understanding and determining inter-community relations so as to bring about lasting peace and harmony. For a harmonious co-existence in a plural social structure, it is necessary that we adopt a proper attitude toward other faith-communities. Theologians have studied such different attitudes and have broadly agreed upon Alan Race's categorization. According to him, these attitudes can broadly be divided into three categories-exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Most of the modern-day theologians have accepted this categorization, and they include Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, Paul Knitter, and others. Of course, none of

these attitudes is peculiar to any particular faith, and most of the major world religions have followed one or the other attitude at different phases of history.

Exclusivism holds one's own religion as the only valid religion, relegating others as invalid and inauthentic. We cannot limit this attitude to any one religion. We have examples like that of Maimonides who restricts true religion to Judaism and Christianity. The Christian church's all-knowing 'let us teach you' attitude and its theory of 'the white man's burden' are only well known. This myth of the uniqueness of one's faith vis-à-vis other faiths implies division of mankind into better or worse beings as per their religious persuasions. This also makes such a religion shut itself off from any meaningful contact with other religions apart from creating inter-community bitterness. This kind of exclusivistic attitude on the part of any religion is sure to create misunderstanding and apprehension leading to conflict and violence. Several Muslim theologians also consider other religions at fault for having lost or corrupted the original revelation and having fallen into doctrinal error. Authors like Dayanand also fall in this category in the context of Indian religions. The inclusivistic view is a step ahead towards legitimizing the pluralist attitude, though it still remains close to exclusivism. This attitude in the Christian theology of religions, for example, is both an acceptance and a rejection of the other faiths: it accepts the spiritual power and depth manifest in other religions, so that they can also be called a locus of divine presence. On the other hand, it rejects other religions as not being sufficient for salvation apart from Christ, for Christ alone is the Saviour.

The pluralist view of religion which has today been accepted by most of the theologians and philosophers implies that all religions are true and valid to help man secure salvation. It holds that "there can never be just one of anything....The one-way road is most likely the road to destruction. Perhaps this is the abiding

meaning of the story of the Tower of Babel : the Lord God warned against the havoc inherent in all dreams or projects for a monolithic, one way vision of reality." This is somewhat akin to the message contained in a hymn included in the Sikh scripture wherein all religious paths have been declared valid and wherein a prayer is made to God to save the world the way it pleases Him. All religions share something common; they make common reference to a single, transcendent reality. Still they have genuine differences, for each religion is a different historical manifestation of that reality and it presents visions of God, world and humanity from a localized, historically particular perspective. Pluralism accepts this fact of the overlapping encounter of individual traditions with the one reality. It accepts the doctrinal statements of different traditions as referring to one religious reality, but they are presumed not to describe that reality truly, in detail and with any certainty since no one can do that.

There was a time when India took pride in its religious plurality and in the relative harmony of diversity, but of late this plurality of religions has become more a liability. The arrival of Semitic faiths, first Islam and then Christianity both of which first came as traders but later on became conquerors and rulers of the land, created streams of culture-forms parallel to religions of Indian origin, with scarce points of accommodation between them. No doubt, the Bhakti and Sufi movements and later on Sikhism with their catholicity of thought tried to bring about acceptance and appreciation between Hinduism and Islam, but we still come across different faith-communities apprehensive and distrustful of each other. There are violent conflicts and hate crimes because of the mistrust and hatred that they have developed towards each other. The situation gets further complicated as religion is used to settle political and even economic scores. However, this trend needs to be checked at the earliest.

Among the religions of Indian origin, Hinduism and the *sramanic* religions of Buddhism and Jainism agreed in regard to

the *karma* (the mental trace or seed left behind by each thought or action that predisposes one to a similar thought or action in the future; volition; action), *samsara* (the world of phenomena, which is incessantly in motion or flux and of which rebirth is an aspect) and *jiva* (the empirical self, the individual soul) being *anadi* (beginningless) and that by following a particular spiritual path (*marga*) release could be realized. However, each of them posed a different understanding of the Divine/Absolute or Truth to be experienced at the end of the spiritual path. The Brahmanical tradition conceived reality as "pure being" or a pure unchanging substance, a concept found expressed in the *atma* doctrine of the Upanisads. Buddhism takes an entirely opposite view in regard to its perception of reality, and we find that Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions to a large extent shaped each other through mutual opposition and debate. On the other hand, the Jaina view may be said to constitute the third stream of Indian philosophy–laying mid-way between the two extremes.

Hinduism has an all-absorbing nature, and has absorbed unto itself several different, and sometimes mutually contradictory traditions-from atheistic to pantheistic, to deistic or monistic to mystical. It accepts each of these as true within its own perspective. The conflict between the truth of one of these viewpoints with that of the other is accepted because each viewpoint is only a partial perspective of the Divine. Its attempt to absorb unto itself the Buddhist tradition can also be seen in this light. In the case of Sikhism also, the Hindu thinkers and leaders have generally tried to present Sikhism as a sect of Hinduism. One can find an interesting inherent dichotomy in their perception of Khalsa: they acknowleldge their debt to the Sikh Gurus and the Khalsa in defending Hinduism, but at the same time they cannot give up the urge to say that all this happened with the miracles wrought by a deity of the Hindu pantheon.

With the arrival into India of Semitic religions, first Islam and then Christianity, the relationship between the Semitic and Indian religions also became tense because both of the former happened to be missionary religions and both of them believed their religions to be the norm for other religions. Both the communities also tried to use the myth of superiority of their religion to serve their expansionist designs. If Islam made use of blatant force to convert people to its fold, the Christian missionaries tried various other stratagem, including inducements of better social life. The forcible conversions by Islam resulted in clashes with Sikhism, and Sikh history is replete with examples of sacrifices made in opposition to religious exclusivism and to win for humankind the freedom of conscience. Interestingly, both these semitic traditions targeted the tribal and lower caste groups in the Hindu social order, though Christian missionaries at one time felt "that the Sikhs may prove more accessible to scriptural truths" and that the Sikhs had "a state of mind favourable to the reception of Truth."

A study of the Sikh scripture and tradition reveals that Sikhism is obviously inclined towards pluralism. The very format of the Sikh scripture makes a very emphatic statement against exclusivism and inclusivism-truth cannot be the monopoly of any particular religion or caste or race or person. The scripture includes in it the hymns of the Sikh Gurus as well as of certain other holy men coming from Hindu and Muslim traditions. These hymns in their totality have been called the revelatory Word, and it is on this Word that Guru Gobind Singh bestowed the office of Guru for all time to come. All the scriptural hymns, irrespective of their authorship, enjoy equal respect among the devotees. Some of the scriptural hymns suggest validity of other faiths, though the Sikh acceptance of other faiths is not passive, rather it is critical. Lest this acceptance and understanding of other faiths should remain an abstract idea, the scripture favours dialogue to reach the truth. It discourages polemic and recommends the cultivation of humility.

Sikhism has been called a way of life because efforts have been made to put the scriptural teachings into practice. The Gurus set up several institutions to live the precepts they propounded in their hymns. The first such institutions to be set up were the *sangat* and the *dharamsala*, followed by the institution of *langar*. The founder of the faith, Guru Nanak, shared with humankind in general the divine revelation he had through his utterances. People thronged to listen to him wherever he went, and the Guru constituted these followers into *sangats* who met regularly to remember the Name Divine. The place where the *sangat* met was called *dharamsala* which later became the *gurdwara*. Anybody irrespective of his creed or caste could attend the *sangat*, and all members of the *sangat* would sit on the same floor in the *dharamsala* with one another without any favour or prejudice. The institution of *langar* also aimed at eradicating any sense of inequality as people sat together to partake of the food prepared communally.

There have been several instances from the life stories of the Gurus and Sikh history indicating the Sikh perception of other religions. All these events obviously point out that Sikhism embraces entire humanity transcending sectarian considerations. People from all creeds and castes and classes are welcome to their sacred shrines, and everybody is welcome to partake of food in the *langar* attached to each of these shrines. Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom is a rare example of supreme sacrifice to protect the freedom of conscience, to ensure that everybody is able to practice the faith of his choice. Bhai Kanahiya has been a very good example manifesting the Sikh view. While serving water in the battle field at Anandpur, he could not make any distinction between the wounded soldiers of his own camp and that of the enemy because he saw the same divine light on each face. There are numerous examples of Sikhs laying down their lives to protect the hapless in other traditions.

The Sikh view of religion is that it is embedded in society and is also the foundation of society. Therefore, householder's life and active involvement in the affairs of society are not considered hindrance in the moral and spiritual progression of man, rather they serve as the means to achieve the ultimate end of his life. God is with us not only in the solitude and quiet of individual, subjective meditation but He is with us in the struggles of life as well. There is, thus, a perfect amalgamation of the spiritual/sacred and the social/secular. The martyrdoms of Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur were also primarily to eradicate the policies of religious exclusivism and oppression and for erecting a social order wherein prevailed justice and equality and where everyone had the freedom of conscience. Later on, the battles Guru Gobind Singh and then the Khalsa Panth had to fight were also for the creation of a just and equitable society wherein everyone enjoyed the freedom of conscience.

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